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Events, Opportunities

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HEADLINE	01/10 Fed push economy into recession?
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/10/magazine/inflation-federal-reserve.html
GIST	Early last October, Neel Kashkari, the president of the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, spoke to several dozen graduate students at the University of Minnesota. Federal Reserve officials tend to choose

their words with exquisite care. One misstatement or clumsy phrase, even before an audience dressed in shorts and flip-flops, can spook the financial markets. With the Fed, the nation's central bank, rapidly raising interest rates to combat the highest inflation that the United States had experienced in four decades, Wall Street was especially skittish. But there was little chance of Kashkari's committing a gaffe: He was a skilled public speaker, an ability that he honed during a failed campaign for governor in California in 2014. He also had a politician's knack for using easy-to-understand anecdotes to illustrate complicated ideas.

Kashkari was wearing an N95 mask as he walked into the auditorium that evening; his wife and one of his children had Covid-19, and though he tested negative earlier in the day, he wanted to be cautious around others. The mask, which he removed when he took his seat at the front of the room, was a reminder that the pandemic was still disrupting workplaces and daily life. Kashkari, who is 49, carried with him a bottle of Cherry Coke Zero. He drinks soda throughout the day and seldom goes anywhere without a bottle in hand. But the Cherry Coke Zero was also a way into the story that he wanted to share — about inflation, which began spiking in the first quarter of 2021 and was running at around 8 percent year-over-year.

Kashkari told the audience that he often stocked up on soda at a service station near his daughter's school. The store had recently installed Cooler Screens, digital displays that, among other things, showed which drinks were available and what they cost. Curious, Kashkari asked about the screens. The store's manager told him that they were installed to make it easier to update prices; instead of doing it manually, employees could now do it with a push of a button. Those Cooler Screens, Kashkari said, were a window into the current economy: Prices were rising quickly and unpredictably, and merchants, stretched for workers because of a very tight labor market, were having to adjust how they operated in order to keep pace, a sign that inflation was possibly becoming more deeply rooted. "That was a punch in the gut at 8 in the morning," Kashkari said, drawing laughter from the students.

Zooming out, Kashkari explained that the Fed had initially thought that the rise in inflation would be temporary. And it was conceivable that inflation might have eased on its own: Covid had disrupted global supply chains and had also created excess consumer demand, and perhaps, over time, things would have come back into balance on their own. But unchecked inflation can be ruinous, and Kashkari said that for the Fed, the question became, "How much are we willing to roll the dice?" The central bank was now aggressively increasing interest rates to bring inflation back to around 2 percent, its long-established target. If the Fed failed to get inflation lower, it would damage its credibility and sow doubts about its ability to guide the economy. "We at least need to walk the walk," Kashkari said.

The "we" underscored an essential point about the Fed. When the Fed is in the news — and it has been in the headlines a lot lately — the focus is inevitably on the central bank's chair. That was the case under Alan Greenspan, Ben Bernanke and Janet Yellen, and it is also true under the Fed's current chair, Jerome Powell. The effort to rein in inflation is seen as a test of his leadership and a battle that will go a long way to determining his legacy. Monetary policy, though, is made by a committee that includes the Fed's chair, the six other members of its board of governors and the presidents of the 12 regional banks that are part of the Federal Reserve System. Kashkari, now in his eighth year at the Minneapolis Fed, has assumed an unusually high profile for a regional Fed president, and he brings an interesting résumé to the fight against inflation.

If Kashkari's name sounds vaguely familiar, it should: As a Treasury Department official during the 2007-9 global financial crisis, he administered the Troubled Asset Relief Program, or TARP, through which the government propped up banks and other institutions to prevent them from going under. The \$700 billion bailout was deeply controversial, and much of the ire was directed at Kashkari, who had previously worked for Goldman Sachs. An ex-banker throwing a lifeline to bankers was a bad look, to put it gently, and Kashkari was pilloried in the press and on Capitol Hill.

As Kashkari tells it, the financial meltdown shook his faith in the self-correcting powers of capitalism and also prompted him to reflect more deeply on the inequities of the American economy. He arrived in Minneapolis as a chastened free-marketer who thought the Fed could play a bigger role in pushing for a

more just economy. To that end, he helped put the Minneapolis Fed at the center of discussions about the economic consequences of racism and other social ills. He also staked out a position as an ardent dove. In Fed-speak, doves prefer looser monetary policy to maximize employment (lower interest rates stimulate growth, which leads to more hiring) while hawks favor tighter credit to keep inflation down.

When it became evident to him in late 2021 that inflationary pressures were not abating, Kashkari changed course and joined the hawks. Several other Fed officials did likewise (“There are no doves in foxholes” is a quip I heard a few times in recent months, and apparently what passes for central-bank humor). Kashkari embraced his newfound hawkishness with the zeal of a convert, becoming stridently hard-line in his public comments. His about-face has surprised former admirers who were encouraged by his effort to get the Fed to embrace a broader conception of its own mandate and who worry that the central bank has raised rates too abruptly. Kashkari insists that he hasn’t wavered in his desire to promote a fairer economy but that taming inflation must be the priority. “The sooner we take the medicine,” he says, “the less painful it will be.”

The medicine appears to be working — inflation is moderating, and some economists think that we have seen the worst of it. Wage growth remains strong, though, and until that changes, it is going to be very difficult if not impossible for the Fed to get inflation back to 2 percent. The Fed insists that its target rate is inviolable; it raised interest rates again last month and indicated that more increases are likely. There’s a good chance that the Fed could push the economy into recession. As former Treasury secretary Lawrence H. Summers put it when we spoke recently, “It’s hard to stop a car on ice without skidding.” If there is a recession, the pain will probably be felt most acutely by those on the margins — the very people that Kashkari was eager to help. In a sense, Kashkari has come to embody the harsh trade-offs at the heart of the battle against inflation.

When Paul Volcker died three years ago at age 92, he was widely remembered as the savior of the American economy. The imposingly tall, cigar-chomping Volcker was the Fed’s chairman from 1979 to 1987. At the time of his appointment by President Jimmy Carter, the United States was reeling from years of high inflation, high unemployment and sluggish growth. “Stagflation” was the word coined to describe this miserable triad. Two years before Volcker was named Fed chair, Congress passed the Federal Reserve Reform Act, which decreed that the central bank had two primary tasks: keeping prices stable and promoting maximum employment — what has come to be known as the Fed’s “dual mandate.” In the late 1970s, the Fed was failing at both.

Volcker believed that curbing inflation was the necessary prerequisite for a return to economic health. Inflation is the rate at which prices increase over a given period of time. When it is persistently high — and it was around 12 percent annually when Volcker took office — it erodes the purchasing power of consumers; their money is worth less and less. Under Volcker, the Fed raised interest rates to 20 percent and tipped the economy into recession twice — once in early 1980, and again the following year (loosely defined, a recession is when the economy contracts for an extended period). But the draconian measures worked: By 1983, inflation had plummeted to around 4 percent, unemployment was coming down and the economy was recovering. In economic and financial circles, Volcker became a sainted figure, credited with laying the foundation for decades of low inflation, relatively stable growth and rising — if unevenly distributed — prosperity.

The pandemic roused inflation from its long slumber. After Covid hit, millions of Americans were stuck at home, and thanks to the booming stock market and stimulus checks sent out by the government, many of them were awash in savings. Unable to travel or dine out, people spent money on things. At the same time, the pandemic had wreaked havoc on supply lines, and many products were no longer reaching warehouses and retail shelves or were arriving in greatly reduced quantities. Too much money was chasing too few goods, and a result was an outbreak of high inflation. Russia’s invasion of Ukraine last winter pushed up food and energy prices, compounding the problem, and the Fed has been scrambling to get inflation under control ever since. (The economist Mohamed El-Erian, the president of Queens’ College, Cambridge, and a leading voice in the debate over inflation, told me that the central bank’s belated response to surging prices was “one of the biggest Fed policy mistakes ever.”)

The Fed's main inflation-fighting tool is its ability to move interest rates. Interest rates are the cost of borrowing money. When the Fed lowers rates, it is trying to spur the economy; raising rates is meant to slow the economy. The Fed implements monetary policy through one particular interest rate, the Federal Funds Rate, which is what banks charge one another for overnight lending. Think of it as a tiller the Fed uses to help steer the economy. When the Fed Funds Rate goes up, other borrowing costs go up. The Fed has sharply increased the Fed Funds Rate in the last year, and as a consequence, rates for 30-year mortgages have more than doubled (which is one reason home sales have been declining).

Interest-rate decisions are made by the Federal Open Market Committee, or F.O.M.C., which meets in Washington eight times a year. It consists of the seven members of the Fed's board of governors, which includes the Fed's chair, along with the presidents of the 12 regional Fed banks. But not everyone gets a vote. When the F.O.M.C. convenes, voting is restricted to the Fed's governors, the president of the New York Fed and four other regional Fed presidents, who have voting privileges for one year on a rotating basis. The F.O.M.C. has been likened to the College of Cardinals, in that it deliberates in secret and the outcomes are breathlessly awaited.

The last time the Fed tightened interest rates repeatedly was between 2015 and 2018. During that period, it lifted the Fed Funds Rate by 2.25 percentage points. In just the last 10 months, it has increased the Fed Funds Rate by 4.25 percentage points. Not since the early 1980s has the central bank raised interest rates so drastically, naturally inviting comparisons to the Volcker era. There are certainly similarities: Then as now, high inflation was a global phenomenon, and it was driven by a combination of government spending and supply shocks (the 1973-74 OPEC embargo and the Iranian revolution in 1979, each of which sent energy prices soaring).

But there are also some crucial differences. For one thing, interest rates were much higher under Volcker. When the central bank started raising interest rates last March, the Fed Funds Rate was effectively zero. In addition, when Volcker became Fed chair, inflation was already embedded in the economy, a point underscored by a button that President Gerald Ford wore on his lapel that read "WIN," which stood for "Whip Inflation Now."

By contrast, the current outbreak is relatively recent, and the public — so far, at least — doesn't seem to be treating it as permanent. That's important, because fighting inflation is in no small part a battle against the psychology of inflation; the Fed has been raising interest rates not just to dampen price pressures but also to keep inflation expectations from becoming "unanchored" — more Fed-speak, for when people come to believe that high inflation is here to stay, which can turn into a self-fulfilling dynamic. Kashkari's encounter with the Cooler Screens was the sort of thing that could unnerve a central banker worried about an inflationary mind-set taking root. That happened in the 1970s, and it could happen again, but we are not there yet.

Another major difference: The U.S. economy was moribund when Volcker was appointed Fed chair, but that is emphatically not the situation today. While inflation is high, other benchmarks suggest an economy in reasonably good shape. As of December, unemployment was 3.7 percent, a near-record low. Despite inflation, planes and restaurants and stores have been full. The economy shrank in the first two quarters of 2022, which by some definitions meant that the United States was in a recession. Yet, the economy was also adding jobs during this period. A contracting economy is supposed to shed jobs, not gain them. So was that a recession? It didn't feel like one. In the third quarter, the economy started growing again — gross domestic product, or G.D.P., was up 3.2 percent — even though the Fed had, by that point, raised interest rates multiple times. The pandemic has been a disorienting experience, and it has yielded a peculiar post-pandemic economy. "This is the most confusing economy I've seen in my lifetime," says the Harvard economist Jason Furman, who served as chairman of the Council of Economic Advisers under President Barack Obama.

The Fed has acted with notable certitude in the face of all this murkiness. In one of several conversations that we had in recent months, Kashkari agreed that it was difficult to make sense of the economy: "I've never seen the signals so mixed." He went on to say, however, that the inflation data was unambiguous and that the Fed, having learned from Volcker's example, had moved with

appropriate haste and firepower. “We know how to deal with high inflation,” he said. But it can take a while for rate hikes to filter through the economy, and no one has any idea yet if the Fed has done too much, too little or just enough. The answer will have enormous implications not just for the economy, but perhaps also for President Joe Biden’s re-election prospects should he decide to run again.

In 2006, Henry Paulson, the chairman and chief executive of Goldman Sachs, was appointed U.S. Treasury secretary by President George W. Bush. At the time, Kashkari was an investment banker for Goldman in San Francisco. He joined the firm four years earlier, after earning an M.B.A. from the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School of Business (he also held undergraduate and master’s degrees in mechanical engineering from the University of Illinois and previously worked on the James Webb Space Telescope). When Paulson was named Treasury secretary, Kashkari left him a phone message expressing a desire to join his team in Washington. After first working on issues involving alternative energy, Kashkari was asked by Paulson to look at the housing market, which following a long run-up was suddenly tanking. The housing collapse triggered a financial crisis that took down two investment banks, Bear Stearns and Lehman Brothers.

When Lehman fell, Kashkari recalls, it was a “break-the-glass moment.” The Treasury Department, working with the Federal Reserve, came up with a \$700 billion rescue package, and Kashkari was put in charge of it. He was a controversial choice: He was just 35, which seemed insultingly young, and a Goldman alum, no less. The press dubbed him “the \$700 Billion Man” and “Ferrari Kashkari.”

It can be argued that TARP worked, or at least didn’t fail: The financial system recovered, the program ended up costing less than initially projected and, as Kashkari likes to point out, the government ended up making a profit on the bailout of the banks. But it was wildly unpopular: While millions of Americans lost their homes and savings, the Wall Streeters who crashed the economy were rescued from their own greed and folly. Even though he became an object of scorn, Kashkari says he understands the rage that people felt: The bailout was antithetical to the spirit of capitalism, and as he puts it, “When you violate the core beliefs of a society, I think it leads to great anger.” The anger was exacerbated when none of the major culprits faced any legal reckoning. Kashkari says that TARP was necessary to save the economy but helped fuel the populist backlash that has destabilized our politics.

The 2007-9 crisis also prompted a change in how he thought about the world. Growing up in Akron, Ohio, he was the Alex Keaton of his household: While the rest of the family was politically liberal, he was a Ronald Reagan fanboy, drawn to the rugged individualism that Reagan championed. When Kashkari arrived in Washington years later, he was something of a free-market purist. The financial upheaval shattered his belief in unfettered capitalism. He now realized that “capitalism can get things, big things, really wrong” and that “it was important to have robust regulations to protect against the gravest risks.”

After leaving the Treasury Department in May 2009, Kashkari retreated to the Sierra Nevada, where he lived in a cabin, chopped down trees and helped Paulson write his memoirs. After his sojourn in the woods, he took a job with Pimco, a bond-trading firm in Newport Beach, Calif. But it was a restive period for Kashkari; the work didn’t enthrall him, and he was going through a divorce (he has since remarried and is the father of two young children). He eventually decided that, despite all the criticism and ridicule he faced because of TARP, he wanted to return to public service. In 2014, he won the Republican nomination for governor of California and faced the incumbent, Jerry Brown, in the general election. Kashkari ran a spirited, quixotic campaign — he spent a week living as a homeless person in Fresno — but was trounced by Brown, who won with 60 percent of the vote.

The following year, he was approached by an executive search firm that was helping the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis find a new president. The Minneapolis Fed is part of a network of regional banks that make up the Federal Reserve System, which was created in 1913 and which is almost as complicated as the economy it helps manage. The Fed’s seven governors are based in Washington and are federal employees. All of them are nominated by the president and subject to Senate confirmation. The regional Fed banks are quasi-public — they were established by Congress but operate as private corporations and are owned collectively by banks in the areas they serve. Though the

regional Feds all have boards that choose their presidents, every regional Fed president must be approved by the Fed's governors. They then serve five-year terms.

Kashkari might have seemed an unlikely candidate to lead the Minneapolis Fed. He had no connection to the district that it represents, which includes Minnesota, Montana, the Dakotas, parts of Wisconsin and Michigan's Upper Peninsula. In addition, he was not an economist; Fed officials are not required to be economists, but his five most recent predecessors at the Minneapolis Fed were. (Jerome Powell is not an economist, either, but he was a Fed governor for nearly six years before being promoted to chairman in 2018.) Kashkari's run for governor figured to be another strike against him. The Fed zealously guards its independence from the elected branches and is sensitive to anything that suggests politicization. Kashkari feared that his foray into electoral politics would be a deal-breaker.

That turned out not to be the case: The Minneapolis Fed was looking for someone with policymaking and management experience, as well as a dash of charisma, and Kashkari was hired. He insists that he didn't view the job as a chance for redemption, or as an opportunity to rehabilitate his image. But in the years since the financial crisis, he had grown increasingly troubled by issues like the racial wealth gap, and he believed that the Federal Reserve was uniquely positioned to shine a spotlight on them. It had not been overrun by partisanship and could objectively examine economic disparities in a way that Congress, say, could not. And Kashkari wanted the Minneapolis Fed to be at the forefront of this effort.

For many years, the Minneapolis Fed was a lodestar of what was known colloquially as "freshwater" economics, so named because it grew out of several universities in the Great Lakes region. In crudest terms, the freshwater camp believed that the economy could usually heal itself and that government intervention was generally unhelpful. This extended to the Fed and monetary policy: The freshwater view was that the central bank's main job was to control inflation, and its adherents frowned on the idea of using interest rates to try to jump-start an ailing economy or — worse still — to boost employment. The global financial crisis, a cataclysmic market failure, was seen by many observers as a death blow for the freshwater school. That Kashkari, of all people, ended up at the Minneapolis Fed, of all places, was an intriguing coda to the events of 2007-9.

But the "freshwater" label obscured a larger truth about the Minneapolis Fed: Ideological predilections aside, it was known to produce lots of deeply insightful research. That was also the case at other regional banks, which highlights an important fact about the Fed, which is that in addition to its policymaking function, it is one of the world's premier economic research institutions. Hundreds of economists are employed throughout the Federal Reserve System, and they turn out vast amounts of expert analysis. As Kashkari saw it, the Fed had the resources to examine economic disparities in a granular way. He also wanted the central bank to take a somewhat broader view of its own role, which historically had "leaned to the narrow side," as he puts it. How the nation's wealth is allocated is ultimately up to the voters and their elected representatives. Still, he believed that the Fed's research could do more to advance economic justice.

In 2017, to study issues around inequality, Kashkari established an in-house think tank at the Minneapolis Fed called the Opportunity & Inclusive Growth Institute. It is run by Abigail Wozniak, a labor economist who joined the Minneapolis Fed from the University of Notre Dame. Wozniak told me that she took the job because she wanted to be closer to the policymaking process and was also drawn to Kashkari's boundary-pushing vision. She says that Kashkari thought the Fed should be "responsive to the new realities" of American economic life. The institute holds twice-yearly conferences and features a steady flow of research on issues at the intersection of race, gender, class, public health, education and economics.

After the 2020 murder of George Floyd, which took place in Minneapolis, Kashkari helped spearhead a series of virtual conferences, involving all 12 regional Fed bank presidents, on racism and the economy. The discussions covered a range of subtopics, including health care, financial services, housing, entrepreneurship, education and even the dearth of Black representation in the economics profession. While the series grew out of the outrage caused by Floyd's killing at the hands of Minneapolis police officers, it also called attention to a serious economic problem: Racial discrimination was a huge drag

on the economy. A Citigroup study, released that same year, estimated that the United States economy could have added another \$16 trillion if gaps in critical areas like wages, health care and education had been closed for Black Americans in 2000.

Kashkari has been unusually outspoken for a regional Fed president. The heads of the regional Fed banks tend to make news only when they comment on the economy or have been accused of ethical lapses. (The presidents of the Boston and Dallas Fed banks both stepped down in 2021 after questions were raised about investments they had made, though both have maintained that they abided by the Fed's ethics rules.) But Kashkari didn't feel handcuffed by institutional reticence. Speaking of the role of regional Fed presidents, he said, "Yes, they're typically sleepy jobs, but opportunities are what you make of them." Kashkari has not been shy about using his platform as a bully pulpit. For instance, he bluntly tells audiences in his largely rural district that immigration is the only way their small communities are likely to thrive.

But Kashkari has also pushed the limits of what Fed officials can say and do. Following Floyd's death, he tweeted that it was clear to him that the Minneapolis police officers had been "trained to use deadly force against Black men" and that the murder was symptomatic of "institutional racism that is actively taught and reinforced." At one conference on racism and the economy, which took place the week after the Jan. 6 insurrection, Kashkari, commenting on the violence in Washington, said that "if those were Black militants, armed militants, storming the U.S. Capitol, I think they'd all be dead right now. And so that is the most stark example of racism and disparities in our society." These were unusually provocative remarks coming from a Fed official.

In 2020, Kashkari teamed up with Alan Page, a Pro Football Hall of Famer and retired associate justice of the Minnesota Supreme Court, to propose an amendment to the state Constitution that would create a fundamental and civil right to a quality public education for every Minnesota schoolchild. Kashkari then spoke to lawmakers on behalf of the so-called Page Amendment. He justified his advocacy by linking it to the Fed's goal of maximizing employment — more people with good educations would presumably make for a stronger work force. But his involvement in what was clearly a political matter caused consternation among other Fed officials, who viewed it as inappropriate. (The Page Amendment is opposed by the state teachers' union, which claims it is too vague and could be used by pro-voucher groups to undermine public education, and the Legislature has declined to take it up.)

In keeping with his belief that the Fed could do more to address shortcomings in the economy, Kashkari was until recently probably the most dovish figure at the central bank. In 2017, the Fed raised interest rates three times; he voted against all three increases, because he didn't see inflation as an imminent threat and believed that the job market, while relatively strong, could be better. But while Kashkari was a dissenting voice then, within a few years it seemed that the Fed as a whole was becoming more dovish. In August 2020, it updated its approach to fulfilling its employment mandate; the Fed said its objective now was job growth that was "broad-based and inclusive," which was taken to mean growth that helped reduce racial employment disparities. (By all accounts, Kashkari was not the driving force behind this change — it was Fed officials in Washington, led by Jerome Powell.)

The emergence of what appeared to be a kinder, softer Fed drew criticism. Senator Pat Toomey, a Republican from Pennsylvania, accused the central bank of "woke mission creep." (Toomey, who recently left the Senate, declined to be interviewed for this article.) In a talk that he gave in October 2021, Larry Summers suggested that the Fed had failed to keep inflation in check because "we have a generation of central bankers who are defining themselves by their 'wokeness.' They're defining themselves by how socially concerned they are." When I spoke to Summers last fall, he clarified his remarks: He thought it was fine for the Fed to consider inequality and racism in its analyses, but when he made those comments, it seemed to him that the Fed had lost "some of the rigor" that normally guided its policymaking and had perhaps also wavered in its commitment to "doing hard things when necessary." (He thinks, though, that the Fed has atoned for its initial blunder and is doing what is needed to bring inflation under control.)

Kashkari denies that the Fed was distracted by social issues; the central bank simply erred in thinking that high inflation would be temporary. But he admits that the Fed was reluctant to intervene when inflation jumped in early 2021: The economy was just starting to recover from its pandemic-induced coma, and he and his colleagues wanted to see if it would return to the low-inflation, modest-growth equilibrium that prevailed before Covid. “It seems reasonable to me that we would take a few months to study this before declaring, ‘Hey, we’re in a whole new world,’” Kashkari says.

It is obvious now that the Fed should have raised interest rates sooner. “With the benefit of hindsight,” Kashkari says, “do I wish we would have started to tighten policy earlier? Absolutely.” Still, he insists that it was only in late 2021 that it became unambiguously clear to him that rising inflation was not a blip. Once he realized this, he pivoted and decided that rate hikes were required. Kashkari suggests that his previous dovishness has given him added credibility in making the case for the Fed’s current course of action — that if even Neel Kashkari felt that the Fed had to go on a war footing against inflation, it must be so. “I think I can play a pretty unique role here,” he told me.

On the same day that Kashkari met with the University of Minnesota students, he had a video call with William Spriggs, the chief economist of the A.F.L.-C.I.O. While Kashkari was spending much of his time explaining, in interviews and speeches, why the Fed was moving with such urgency to quell inflationary pressures, he was also doing a lot of listening — to C.E.O.s, small-business owners, community activists and labor leaders. It was a perilous moment for the economy, and he wanted to hear different viewpoints. He knew that Spriggs, who is also on the faculty at Howard University, was dubious of the Fed’s rate hikes, and he saw their meeting as an opportunity to test his own assumptions. “Bill’s an experienced guy who brings a perspective, and we might be missing something, and we need to benefit from that,” Kashkari said later.

For the labor movement, the current economy presents an upside: The combination of high inflation and low unemployment is spurring workers to organize and also emboldening them to be more assertive in their dealings with management. Cornell University’s School of Industrial and Labor Relations tracks work stoppages nationwide, and it reported that there were 180 strikes during the first half of 2022, which was nearly double the number from the same period the year before. Unions were formed last year at Amazon and Apple, as well as at Starbucks and Chipotle. And the unionization efforts appear to enjoy strong public support: According to Gallup, 71 percent of Americans approve of labor unions, the highest level since the mid-1960s.

Before discussing monetary policy with Spriggs, Kashkari asked him how concerned A.F.L.-C.I.O. members were about inflation. Spriggs said it broke down along racial lines; internal polling indicated that inflation was the primary economic concern of white A.F.L.-C.I.O. members but barely registered among African American members. He attributed the difference to what he called “the Fox News effect” — whites were more apt to get their news from Fox, which was devoting a lot of airtime to inflation in the run-up to the midterm elections. “Black people don’t watch Fox News,” Spriggs said.

Turning to the Fed, Spriggs said that higher interest rates were not going to solve what he believed was still the underlying source of inflation, supply-chain interruptions caused by the pandemic and then the war in Ukraine. The rate-tightening was very likely, though, to send the economy into recession and cause a jump in unemployment, particularly among low-wage workers, for whom losing a job is often catastrophic. “If you become unemployed,” Spriggs said, “then all bets are off, because you can’t afford anything.” He added: “There is no period in which the Fed pursued a deflationary policy in which low-income people won. The median income of Black families falls, and it takes years to come back. Child poverty spikes.”

Kashkari listened intently and didn’t push back except when Spriggs said that unemployment insurance at the state level would offer scant relief to laid-off workers. Kashkari interjected to say that the system had been overwhelmed by the enormous job losses during the first months of the pandemic but that “if we have a normal recession, it should be within the capacity of the states to handle it.” Spriggs said that a number of states had decided that they were too generous during Covid and had reduced eligibility

and cut benefits. Likewise, there was little political will in Washington to cushion the blow for victims of a recession.

While the conversation didn't cause Kashkari to rethink his support for what the Fed was doing, it was a bracing reminder that the battle against inflation was potentially undermining the central bank's pursuit of more equitable job growth — an effort that was paying off. After soaring to nearly 17 percent during the first months of the pandemic, joblessness among African Americans has fallen to under 6 percent, a near-record low. African Americans have experienced their strongest wage growth ever. But these gains may be in jeopardy because of the Fed's interest-rate increases. Normally, unemployment among African Americans is almost twice what it is for their white counterparts, so if the overall jobless rate rises above, say, 5 percent, the rate for African Americans could very well be back in the double digits.

Most economists think that the Fed has had no choice but to move forcefully against inflation. "The biggest sin any central bank can commit is to allow inflation to become entrenched," says Diane Swonk, the chief economist at KPMG US. And Kashkari himself sees no contradiction between his present hawkishness and his desire for a more equitable economy. He claims that bringing inflation down will benefit all Americans, but especially low-wage workers, who have a much harder time coping with spiraling prices. Higher interest rates may cause a recession and increase unemployment, but he is optimistic that once inflation is tamed, we can recover whatever ground was lost and enjoy sustained growth. He cites the Volcker precedent: "While what Volcker did was painful in the moment," he says, "it paid dividends for decades." But Kashkari also acknowledges that the cost of curbing inflation will probably fall hardest on the most vulnerable. "I'm waiting for the crisis to come along where the rich get hurt," he says.

Those sentiments haven't — and won't — mollify critics who think the Fed is showing callous disregard for the economic welfare of millions of Americans. Claudia Sahm, a former Fed economist, believes that the central bank has raised interest rates much more aggressively than circumstances warrant. What she finds particularly objectionable is that Fed officials, including Kashkari, claim to be acting in the interest of people on the margins. But in her view, current Fed policy is putting lower-income Americans needlessly at risk. While there is always debate about whether inflation or unemployment is worse, Sahm contends that joblessness is unquestionably more harmful for those at the bottom: "If you are living paycheck to paycheck, yes, higher inflation hurts," she says, "but no paycheck hurts a lot more."

Danny Blanchflower, an economist at Dartmouth College, was an author of a 2014 study that found that being unemployed was indeed worse for a person's economic and emotional well-being than rising inflation. Like Sahm, he disagrees with the Fed's rate increases (he thinks high inflation is, in fact, temporary), and is disappointed but not surprised that Kashkari, in his judgment, capitulated to the hawks. Blanchflower served for three years on the Bank of England's Monetary Policy Committee and says the desire for consensus at central banks, especially in emergency situations, can make it very hard to hold dissenting views. Still, he wishes that Kashkari had stood firm. "His dovish message has been lost," Blanchflower says. "Why did he give up?"

On Dec. 14, the Fed raised interest rates for the seventh time in 2022 and indicated that further increases were probable. In a news conference that day, Powell, the Fed chair, said he didn't think anyone knew whether a recession was inevitable but acknowledged that the odds of achieving a so-called soft landing — in which inflation is brought under control by slowing economic growth without causing a recession — were diminishing. He seemed to suggest that hard times were coming. "I wish there were a completely painless way to restore price stability," Powell said. "There isn't." It was a sobering message not just for the public but perhaps also for President Biden, whose political fortunes could hinge on what the Fed does from here. (Powell declined to comment for this article.)

The encouraging news is that inflation is easing. The Consumer Price Index, or C.P.I., which is the government's main inflation gauge, rose 7.1 percent, down from a peak increase of 9.1 percent recorded in June. Since then, the average price of gas has fallen by \$1.19 per gallon. It seems most of the arrows are now pointing in the right direction. An exception, at least from the Fed's perspective, is the labor

market. The Fed is worried about wage growth as a source of inflation. With unemployment so low, companies are having to pay more to keep the workers they have and to hire new ones. Wages are currently rising at around 5 percent year over year, and unless that slows, the Fed will struggle to get inflation back to around 2 percent — and the danger is that if it doesn't slow, businesses will raise prices to cover their added labor costs, which could spark a dreaded phenomenon known as the wage-price spiral. Odd as it might seem to regard wage increases as a problem, Fed officials note that inflation is eroding those gains.

It's possible that the labor market has undergone a structural change as a result of the pandemic. At least 1.1 million Americans have died from Covid-19, which has effectively shrunk the pool of available workers. Long Covid has undoubtedly sidelined many Americans, and the pandemic also led a lot of people to take early retirement. The upshot is that there are not enough workers to fill all the available jobs, a situation made worse by the prepandemic decline in legal immigration. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, there are currently 1.7 job vacancies for every one job seeker. When I spoke to Kashkari in early December, he noted that, even after all the Fed's rate increases, the labor market was still incredibly tight. "The No. 1 issue I hear from employers in our region is that they can't find workers," he said. "There's no evidence when I talk to them of any softening of labor demand."

The Fed hopes that vacancies will decline as businesses resign themselves to leaving jobs unfilled and that this might be enough to cool wage growth without a sizable uptick in unemployment. In its most recent forecast, however, released last month, the Fed projected that unemployment would rise to 4.6 percent from 3.7 percent this year, which equates to the loss of around 1.5 million jobs. There is skepticism among economists that the central bank can bring inflation down to its target rate without a big jump in joblessness. "Getting all the way to 2 percent could be very hard," says Jason Furman, the economist at Harvard. "I think it could require a large increase in unemployment if the Fed really needs the inflation rate to get back to 2 percent."

The prospect of mass layoffs and a recession has prompted renewed discussion about whether the Fed should even be aiming for 2 percent inflation, which has been the official target since 2012 (and was the unstated goal for many years before that). Some economists argue that 2 percent is too low because it constrains the Fed's ability to pull the economy out of downturns, and they fear that the cost of driving inflation back to that level could be punishing. "In the months ahead," the New York Times Opinion columnist Paul Krugman recently wrote, "we may well face a choice between imposing a recession to get inflation back down to a largely arbitrary target, which we wouldn't have chosen 20 years ago if we'd known then what we know now, and declaring victory with inflation fairly low but not quite that low."

Fed officials insist that they have no intention for now of backing away from 2 percent. At his news conference last month, Powell was unequivocal: "We're not going to consider that under any circumstances." When I spoke recently with the former Fed chair Ben Bernanke, he told me that it would be a mistake for the central bank to abandon its own target while battling the highest inflation that the country has experienced in decades. "Whatever the merits of the case for changing the inflation target in the long run, it can't be done now because of the damage it would do to the Fed's credibility," Bernanke said. "You can't move the goal posts when you are behind in the game."

But Olivier Blanchard, the former chief economist of the International Monetary Fund, suspects the Fed may end up deciding that 3 percent or thereabouts is close enough. Blanchard has long believed that 2 percent is too low and that 3 percent would give the Fed more flexibility. And for consumers, he adds, the difference between 2 percent inflation and 3 percent is negligible. On the other hand, getting to 2 percent from 3 percent could inflict a lot of additional economic pain on the country. Blanchard argues that if inflation falls rapidly over the next few months, some observers will feel that the battle has been won and that the Fed should stand down. "People will say: 'We've beaten inflation, you want to reduce inflation from 3 to 2, which we don't care about, and you may have to do a recession again? That's crazy stuff.'"

If a recession is unavoidable, the Biden administration obviously hopes it will be brief. The Volcker era offers some encouragement. After the recession of 1981-82, the economy rebounded very quickly, and in 1984, President Reagan was re-elected in a 49-state landslide. But if the current tightening cycle results in a slowdown that persists into next year, scrutiny of the Fed could intensify. The central bank is normally pretty adept at resisting pressure from the White House — “The best thing you can do if you are in the Fed is put earmuffs on and just don’t listen,” Alan Greenspan advised in jest. And in contrast to Donald Trump, who lashed out at Powell over the Fed’s rate increases in 2018, President Biden, arch-institutionalist, will undoubtedly refrain from criticizing the Fed publicly. But his allies on Capitol Hill may not be so circumspect. The Fed is an unelected body, and if it triggers a prolonged recession, it could find itself in a political maelstrom.

When I spoke to Kashkari last month, he said that while the most recent data was promising, he was not yet convinced that inflation had peaked and believed that it would be a mistake for the Fed to pause the rate increases. His views carry more weight now, because he is a voting member of the F.O.M.C. this year; the committee’s next meeting runs Jan. 31 to Feb. 1. I commented that the financial markets didn’t seem to believe that the Fed would stay the course. The central bank, in its latest forecast, had projected that the Fed Funds Rate would increase to at least 5 percent and that there would be no rate cuts this year. But the markets were pricing in cuts starting in its second half. “I’ve spent enough time around Wall Street to know that they are culturally, institutionally, optimistic,” Kashkari replied. I said it seemed almost as if the markets were playing chicken with the Fed. Kashkari laughed. “They are going to lose the game of chicken, I can tell you that,” he said.

He conceded, though, that the coming months could test the Fed’s resolve. Thus far, Fed officials have been virtually unanimous in support of higher interest rates. Kashkari said that this solidarity might become harder to maintain the longer the inflation battle drags on, especially if — or when — the labor market cools. If inflation were to fall to 3 percent with unemployment increasing to 6 percent, things could get tricky. He personally wouldn’t flinch: The Fed’s credibility was at stake, and it was obligated to get inflation down to 2 percent and “not just come up short because it is too painful to get there,” as he put it. Kashkari couldn’t say for sure that others at the Fed would remain so unyielding, however. “There are going to be tougher judgment calls to make.”

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HEADLINE	01/10 Bank giants readying for recession
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/business/finance/us-banks-get-ready-shrinking-profits-recession-2023-01-10/
GIST	<p>NEW YORK, Jan 10 (Reuters) - U.S. banking giants are forecast to report lower fourth quarter profits this week as lenders stockpile rainy-day funds to prepare for an economic slowdown that is battering investment banking.</p> <p>Four American banking giants -- JPMorgan Chase & Co (JPM.N), Bank of America Corp (BAC.N), Citigroup Inc (C.N) and Wells Fargo & Co (WFC.N) -- will report earnings on Friday.</p> <p>Along with Morgan Stanley (MS.N) and Goldman Sachs (GS.N), they are the six largest lenders expected to amass a combined \$5.7 billion in reserves to prepare for soured loans, according to average projections by Refinitiv. That is more than double the \$2.37 billion set aside a year earlier.</p> <p>"With most U.S. economists forecasting either a recession or significant slowdown this year, banks will likely incorporate a more severe economic outlook," said Morgan Stanley analysts led by Betsy Graseck in a note.</p> <p>The Federal Reserve is raising interest rates aggressively in an effort to tame inflation near its highest in decades. Rising prices and higher borrowing costs have prompted consumers and businesses to curb their spending, and since banks serve as economic middlemen, their profits decline when activity slows.</p> <p>The six banks are also expected to report an average 17% drop in net profit in the fourth quarter from a year earlier, according to preliminary analysts' estimates from Refinitiv.</p>

Still, lenders stand to gain from rising rates that allow them to earn more from the interest they charge borrowers.

Investors and analysts will focus on bank bosses' commentary as an important gauge of the economic outlook. A parade of executives has warned in recent weeks of the tougher business environment, which has prompted firms to slash compensation or eliminate jobs.

Goldman Sachs will start laying off thousands of employees from Wednesday, two sources familiar with the move said Sunday. Morgan Stanley and Citigroup, among others, have also cut jobs after a plunge in investment-banking activity.

The moves come after Wall Street dealmakers handling mergers, acquisitions and initial public offerings faced a sharp drop in their businesses in 2022 as rising interest rates roiled markets.

Global investment banking revenue sank to \$15.3 billion in the fourth quarter, down more than 50% from a year-earlier quarter, according to data from Dealogic.

Consumer businesses will also be a key focus in banks' results. Household accounts have been propped up for much of the pandemic by a strong job market and government stimulus, and while consumers are generally in good financial shape, more are starting to fall behind on payments.

"We're exiting a period of extraordinarily strong credit quality," said David Fanger, senior vice president, financial institutions group, at Moody's Investors Service.

At Wells Fargo, the fallout from a fake accounts scandal and regulatory penalties will continue to weigh on results. The lender expected to book an expense of about \$3.5 billion after it agreed to settle charges over widespread mismanagement of car loans, mortgages and bank accounts with the U.S. Consumer Financial Protection Bureau, the watchdog's largest-ever civil penalty.

Analysts will also watch if banks such as Morgan Stanley and Bank of America book any writedowns on the \$13-billion loan to fund Elon Musk's purchase of Twitter.

More broadly, the KBW index (.BKK) of bank stocks is up about 4% this month after sinking almost 28% in the last year.

While market sentiment took a sharp turn from hopeful to fearful in 2022, some large banks could overcome the most dire predictions because they have shed risky activities, wrote Susan Roth Katzke, an analyst at Credit Suisse.

"We see more resilient earning power through the cycle after a decade of de-risking," she wrote in a note. "We cannot dismiss the fundamental strength."

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HEADLINE	01/10 China retaliates SKorea Covid curbs
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/china/covid-wave-past-its-peak-many-parts-china-state-media-2023-01-10/
GIST	<p>BEIJING, Jan 10 (Reuters) - Beijing retaliated on Tuesday against South Korea's COVID-19 curbs on travellers from China, while state media further downplayed the severity of the outbreak in the last major economy to reopen its borders after three years of isolation.</p> <p>China ditched mandatory quarantines for arrivals and allowed travel to resume across its border with Hong Kong on Sunday, removing the last major restrictions under the "zero-COVID" regime which it abruptly began dismantling in early December after historic protests against the curbs.</p>

But the virus is spreading unchecked among its 1.4 billion people and worries over the scale and impact of its outbreak have prompted South Korea, the United States and other countries to require negative COVID tests from travellers from China.

Although China imposes similar testing requirements for all arrivals, foreign ministry spokesperson Wang Wenbin told reporters on Tuesday the entry curbs for Chinese travellers were "discriminatory."

"We will take reciprocal measures," Wang said, without elaborating.

The Chinese embassy in South Korea has suspended issuing short-term visas for South Korean visitors, it said on Tuesday, the first retaliatory move against nations imposing COVID-19 curbs on travellers from China.

The embassy will adjust the policy subject to the lifting of South Korea's "discriminatory entry restrictions" against China, it said on its official WeChat account.

Kyodo news agency, quoting multiple travel industry sources, said China has told travel agencies that it has stopped issuing new visas in Japan.

An AFP journalist tweeted that the Chinese embassy in Japan released a statement confirming the curbs on Tuesday but removed it from its website within minutes.

A spokesperson of the Chinese Embassy in Japan told Reuters that they had nothing to announce on this. Asked about the Twitter reference, she said there was no new information now.

With the virus let loose, China has stopped publishing daily infection tallies. It has been reporting five or fewer deaths a day since the policy U-turn, figures that have been disputed by the World Health Organization and are inconsistent with funeral reporting surging demand.

Some governments have raised concerns about Beijing's data transparency as international experts predict at least 1 million deaths in China this year. Washington has also raised concerns about future potential mutations of the virus.

China dismisses criticism over its data as politically-motivated attempts to smear its "success" in handling the pandemic and said any future mutations are likely to be more infectious but less harmful.

"Since the outbreak, China has had an open and transparent attitude," the foreign ministry's Wang said.

But as infections surge across China's vast rural hinterland, many, including elderly victims, are simply not bothering to get tested.

PAST THE PEAK

State media downplayed the severity of the outbreak.

An article in Health Times, a publication managed by People's Daily, the ruling Communist Party's official newspaper, quoted several officials as saying infections have been declining in the capital Beijing and several Chinese provinces.

Officials in the southern technology powerhouse Shenzhen announced on Tuesday that the city had also passed its peak.

Kan Quan, director of the Office of the Henan Provincial Epidemic Prevention and Control, said nearly 90% of people in the central province of 100 million people had been infected as of Jan. 6.

In the eastern province of Jiangsu, the peak was reached on Dec. 22, while in neighbouring Zhejiang province "the first wave of infections has passed smoothly," officials said.

Financial markets looked through the latest border curbs as mere inconvenience, with the yuan hitting a nearly five-month high.

Although daily flights in and out of China are still at a tenth of pre-COVID levels, businesses across Asia, from South Korean and Japanese shop owners to Thai tour bus operators and K-pop groups celebrated the prospect of more Chinese tourists.

Chinese shoppers spent \$250 billion a year overseas before COVID.

PFIZER CRITICISM

The border rules were not the only COVID conflict brewing in China.

State media lashed out at Pfizer Inc (PFE.N) over the price for its COVID treatment Paxlovid.

"It is not a secret that U.S. capital forces have already accumulated quite a fortune from the world via selling vaccines and drugs, and the U.S. government has been coordinating all along," nationalist tabloid Global Times said in an editorial.

Pfizer's Chief Executive Albert Bourla said on Monday the company was in discussions with Chinese authorities about a price for Paxlovid, but not over licensing a generic version in China.

China's abrupt change of course in COVID policies has caught many hospitals ill-equipped, while smaller cities were left scrambling to secure basic anti-fever drugs.

Yu Weishi, chairman of Youcare Pharmaceutical Group, told Reuters his firm boosted output of its anti-fever drugs five-fold to one million boxes a day in the past month.

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HEADLINE	01/10 WHO recommends masks on long flights
SOURCE	https://www.newsmax.com/finance/streettalk/who-masks-covid-omicron-protection/2023/01/10/id/1103735/
GIST	<p>Countries should consider recommending passengers wear masks on long haul flights to counter the latest omicron subvariant of COVID-19 given its rapid spread in the United States, World Health Organization officials said Tuesday.</p> <p>In Europe, the XBB.1.5 subvariant is being detected in small but growing numbers, WHO/Europe officials said in a press briefing.</p> <p>Passengers should be recommended to wear masks in high-risk settings such as long-haul flights, said WHO's senior emergency officer for Europe, Catherine Smallwood, adding "this should be a recommendation issued to passengers arriving from anywhere where there is widespread COVID-19 transmission."</p> <p>The XBB.1.5 subvariant — the most transmissible omicron sub-variant that has been detected so far — accounted for 27.6% of COVID-19 cases in the United States for the week ending Jan. 7, U.S. health officials have said.</p> <p>It remains unclear if XBB.1.5 will cause its own wave of infections around the world. Current vaccines continue to protect against severe symptoms, hospitalization and death, experts say.</p> <p>"Countries need to look at the evidence base for pre-departure testing," Smallwood noted, adding it was crucial to not be "blindsided" by an exclusive focus on one particular geographic area.</p>

	<p>If travel measures are considered, she said, "our opinion is that travel measures should be implemented in a non-discriminatory manner."</p> <p>That did not mean the agency recommends the testing of passengers coming from the United States at this stage, she added.</p> <p>Measures that can be taken include genomic surveillance, and targeting passengers arriving from other countries as long as it not divert resources away from the domestic surveillance systems. Other examples include wastewater monitoring systems that can look at wastewater around points of entry such as airports.</p> <p>XBB.1.5 is yet another descendant of omicron, the most contagious variant of the virus causing COVID-19 that is now globally dominant. It is an offshoot of XBB, first detected in October, which is itself a recombinant of two other omicron sub-variants.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/10 US: Russia artillery fire down 75%
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2023/01/10/politics/russian-artillery-fire-down-75-percent-ukraine/index.html
GIST	<p>WashingtonCNN — As Russia's invasion of Ukraine enters its 11th month, US and Ukrainian officials tell CNN that Russia's artillery fire is down dramatically from its wartime high, in some places by as much as 75 percent.</p> <p>US and Ukrainian officials don't yet have a clear or singular explanation. Russia may be rationing artillery rounds due to low supplies, or it could be part of a broader reassessment of tactics in the face of successful Ukrainian offenses.</p> <p>Either way, the striking decline in artillery fire is further evidence of Russia's increasingly weak position on the battlefield nearly a year into its invasion, US and Ukrainian officials told CNN. It also comes as Ukraine is enjoying increased military support from its western allies, with the US and Germany announcing last week that they will be providing Ukrainian forces for the first time with armored fighting vehicles, as well as another Patriot Defense missile battery that will help protect its skies.</p> <p>Russian President Vladimir Putin, meanwhile, is apparently clambering to shore up domestic political support, US intelligence officials believe, for a war he initially would only describe as a limited "special military operation."</p> <p>US officials believe the 36-hour ceasefire Putin ordered in Ukraine last week to allow for the observance of Orthodox Christmas was an attempt to pander to Russia's extensive Christian population, two people familiar with the intelligence told CNN, as well as an opportunity for Putin to blame Ukrainians for breaking it and paint them as heretical heathens.</p> <p>"The bucket is getting smaller"</p> <p>Much of the domestic opposition Putin and his generals have faced over the handling of the war has come from one of the Russian leader's closest allies: Yevgeny Prigozhin, the head of the mercenary organization Wagner Group. Prigozhin has complained that the Russian Ministry of Defense has botched the war effort, and that Wagner Group should be given more equipment, authority and autonomy to carry out operations in Ukraine.</p> <p>But Wagner Group has lost thousands of fighters in Ukraine the last two months alone, a senior US official said.</p> <p>Russia suffered another setback earlier this month when Ukrainian forces hit a weapons depot in Makiivka in eastern Ukraine, destroying more Russian supplies and killing scores of Russian troops housed nearby. The strike also raised questions among prominent Russian military bloggers about the</p>

basic competence of the Russian military brass, which had apparently decided to house hundreds of Russian troops next to an obvious Ukrainian target.

“Maybe this one strike is a drop in the bucket, but the bucket is getting smaller,” a US defense official said, referring to the Russians’ dwindling stockpiles.

40 year-old shells

To date, questions about Russia’s stockpile of weapons have mostly focused on their precision-guided munitions, such as cruise missiles and ballistic missiles. But US officials said their dramatically reduced rate of artillery fire may indicate that the prolonged and brutal battle has had a significant effect on Russia’s supply of conventional weapons as well.

Last month, a senior US military official said that Russia has had to resort to 40-year-old artillery shells as their supply of new ammo dwindled. To the US, the use of degraded ammunition, as well as the Kremlin’s outreach to countries like North Korea and Iran, was a sign of Russia’s diminished stocks of weaponry.

The rationing of ammunition and lower rate of fire appears to be a departure from Russian military doctrine, which traditionally calls for the heavy bombardment of a target area with massive artillery fire and rocket fire. That strategy played out in cities like Mariupol and Melitopol as Russian forces used the punishing strikes to drive slow, brutal advances in Ukraine.

Officials said the strategy shift could be the doing of the recently installed Russian theater commander, General Sergey Surovikin, who the US believes is more competent than his predecessors.

Ukraine has had little choice but to ration its ammunition since the beginning of the war. Ukrainian troops rapidly burned through their own supply of Soviet-era 152 mm ammunition when the conflict erupted, and while the US and its allies have provided hundreds of thousands of rounds of Western 155 mm ammunition, even this supply has had its limits.

As a result, Ukraine has averaged firing around 4,000-7,000 artillery rounds per day – far fewer than Russia.

“It looks ridiculous now”

The Russians’ declining rate of fire is not linear, one US defense official noted, and there are days when Russians still fire far more artillery rounds – particularly around the eastern Ukrainian cities of Bakhmut and Kremlinna, as well as some near Kherson in the south.

US and Ukrainian officials have offered widely different estimates of Russian fire, with US officials saying the rate has dropped from 20,000 rounds per day to around 5,000 per day on average. Ukraine estimates that the rate has dropped from 60,000 to 20,000 per day.

But both estimates point to a similar downward trend.

While Russia still has more artillery ammunition available than Ukraine does, early US assessments vastly overestimated the amount that Russia had its disposal, a US military official said, and underestimated how well the Ukrainians would do at hitting Russian logistics sites.

It appears now that Russia is focused more on bolstering its defense fortifications, particularly in central Zaporizhzhia, the UK Ministry of Defense reported in its regular intelligence update on Sunday. The movements suggest that Moscow is concerned about a potential Ukrainian offensive either there or in Luhansk, the ministry said.

“A major Ukrainian breakthrough in Zaporizhzhia would seriously challenge the viability of Russia’s ‘land-bridge’ linking Russia’s Rostov region and Crimea,” the ministry said, while Ukrainian success in Luhansk would “undermine Russia’s professed war aim of ‘liberating’ the Donbas.”

Ukraine's counter-offensives last fall targeting Kherson in the south and Kharkiv in the north resulted in humiliating defeats for Russia – and were aided enormously by sophisticated western weaponry like HIMARS rocket launchers, Howitzer artillery systems and Stinger anti-aircraft missiles that the US had previously been reluctant to provide.

“The fact of the matter is we have been self-detering ourselves for over a year now,” said retired Army Lt. Gen. Ben Hodges, former commander of US Army Europe and NATO Allied Land Command and currently a senior advisor for Human Rights First.

“There's been so much anxiety about the possibility of Russia's escalation – I mean ten months ago, there was concern about giving Stingers...obviously that's ridiculous, and it looks ridiculous now.”

Russia's war with bureaucracy

Tensions between Kremlin defense officials and Wagner Group leaders have also been rising amid public complaints by the mercenaries that they are running low on equipment and reports that their leader, Prigozhin, wants to take control of the lucrative salt mines near Bakhmut.

In a video that ran on Russian state media, Wagner Group fighters complain that they are running low on combat vehicles, artillery shells and ammunition, which is limiting their ability to conquer Bakhmut – shortages Prigozhin then blames on “internal bureaucracy and corruption.”

“This year we will win! But first we will conquer our internal bureaucracy and corruption,” he says in the clip. “Once we conquer our internal bureaucracy and corruption, then we will conquer the Ukrainians and NATO, and then the whole world. The problem now is that the bureaucrats and those engaging in corruption won't listen to us now because for New Year's they are all drinking champagne.”

Prigozhin's ambitions are not limited to greater political power, however, the US believes. There are also indications that he wants to take control over the lucrative salt and gypsum from mines near Bakhmut, a senior administration official tells CNN.

“This is consistent with Wagner's modus operandi in Africa, where the group's military activities often function hand in hand with control of mining assets,” the official said, adding that the US believes these monetary incentives are driving Prigozhin and Russia's “obsession” with taking Bakhmut.

The official also said that Wagner Group has suffered heavy casualties in its operations near Bakhmut since late November.

“Out of its force of nearly 50,000 mercenaries (including 40,000 convicts), the company has sustained over 4,100 killed and 10,000 wounded, including over 1,000 killed between late November and early December near Bakhmut,” the official said, adding that about 90% of those killed were convicts.

The official said that Russia “cannot sustain these kinds of losses.”

“If Russia does eventually seize Bakhmut, Russia will surely characterize this, misleadingly, as a ‘major victory,’” the official added. “But we know that is not the case. If the cost for each 36 square miles of Ukraine [the approximate size of Bakhmut] is thousands of Russians over seven months, this is the definition of Pyrrhic victory.”

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HEADLINE	01/09 Gas stoves a thing of the past?
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2023/01/09/business/gas-stove-ban-federal-agency/index.html
GIST	New York CNN — A federal agency is considering a ban on gas stoves, a source of indoor pollution linked to childhood asthma.

In an interview with [Bloomberg](#), a US Consumer Product Safety commissioner said gas stove usage is a “hidden hazard.”

“Any option is on the table. Products that can’t be made safe can be banned,” agency commissioner Richard Trumka Jr. told Bloomberg. The report said the agency plans “to take action” to address the indoor pollution caused by stoves.

The CPSC has been considering action on gas stoves for months. Trumka [recommended in October](#) that the CPSC seek public comment on the hazards associated with gas stoves. The pollutants have been linked to asthma and worsening respiratory conditions.

A December 2022 study in the International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health found that indoor gas stove usage is associated with an increased risk of current asthma among children. The study found that almost 13% of current childhood asthma in the US is attributable to gas stove use.

Trumka told Bloomberg the agency plans to open public comment on gas stove hazards. Options besides a ban include “setting standards on emissions from the appliances.”

Thirty-five percent of households in the United States use a gas stove, and the number [approaches 70%](#) in some states like California and New Jersey. Other [studies](#) have found these stoves emit significant levels of nitrogen dioxide, carbon monoxide and fine particulate matter – which without proper ventilation can raise the levels of indoor concentration levels to unsafe levels as deemed by the EPA.

“Short-term exposure to NO₂ is linked to worsening asthma in children, and long-term exposure has been determined to likely cause the development of asthma,” a group of lawmakers said in a [letter](#) to chair Alexander Hoehn-Saric, adding it can also exacerbate cardiovascular illnesses.

The letter – Sen. Corey Booker and Sen. Elizabeth Warren among its signers – argued that Black, Latino and low-income households are more likely to be affected by these adverse reactions, because they are either more likely to live near a waste incinerator or coal ash site or are in a home with poor ventilation.

In a statement to CNN, the CPSC said the agency has not proposed any regulatory action on gas stoves at this time, and any regulatory action would “involve a lengthy process.”

“Agency staff plans to start gathering data and perspectives from the public on potential hazards associated with gas stoves, and proposed solutions to those hazards later this year,” the commission said in a statement. “Commission staff also continues to work with voluntary standards organizations to examine gas stove emissions and address potential hazards.”

Some cities across the US [banned natural gas hookups](#) in all new building construction to reduce greenhouse emissions – Berkeley in 2019, San Francisco in 2020, New York City in 2021. But as of last February, [20 states](#) with GOP-controlled legislatures have passed so-called “preemption laws” that prohibit cities from banning natural gas.

“To me that’s what’s interesting about this new trend, it seems like states are trying to eliminate the possibility before cities try to catch onto this,” Sarah Fox, an associate law professor at Northern Illinois University School of Law, told CNN last year. “The natural gas industry... has been very aggressive in getting this passed.”

In a statement to CNN Business, the Association of Home Appliance Manufacturers said an improvement in ventilation is the solution to preventing indoor air pollution while cooking.

“A ban on gas cooking appliances would remove an affordable and preferred technology used in more than 40% of home across the country,” Jill Notini, industry spokesperson, said in a statement. ” A ban of

	<p>gas cooking would fail to address the overall concern of indoor air quality while cooking, because all forms of cooking, regardless of heat source, generate air pollutants, especially at high temperatures.”</p> <p>The American Gas Association pushed back against a natural gas ban in a blog post in December, saying it makes housing more expensive as “electric homes require expensive retrofits.”</p> <p>However, Biden’s landmark Inflation Reduction Act includes a rebate of up to \$840 for an electric stove or other electric appliances, and up to an \$500 to help cover the costs of converting to electric from gas.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/09 Egg prices tripled in some states
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/egg-prices-rising-chicken-bird-flu/
GIST	<p>The rising cost of eggs in the U.S. is denting household budgets. Americans in recent years have increased the number of eggs they consume while reducing their intake of beef and venison, according to data from the U.S. Department of Agriculture.</p> <p>Egg consumption has grown in part because more families are eating them as their main protein substitute, Los Angeles Times reporter Sonja Sharp told CBS News. "Each of us eats about as many eggs as one hen can lay a year," she said.</p> <p>As demand for eggs has risen, production in the U.S. has slumped because of the ongoing bird, or "avian," flu epidemic. Nearly 58 million birds have been infected with avian flu as of January 6, the USDA said, making it the deadliest outbreak in U.S. history. Infected birds must be slaughtered, causing egg supplies to fall and prices to surge.</p> <p>In California, for example, data shows the average price for a dozen eggs reached \$7.37 last week, compared with \$2.35 a year ago. The national average egg price per dozen wholesale is now \$3.30, the USDA said last week. The average price for a dozen eggs by U.S. city grew to a record \$3.58 in November, according to the most recent data available from the Federal Reserve Bank of St. Louis.</p> <p>In New York, grocery store owner Jose Filipe said that soaring egg costs have caused many customers to change their spending habits.</p> <p>"I've seen customers gravitate from buying organic eggs now to more conventional eggs, and specifically now, the half dozen. Prices have quadrupled in about six or seven months," he recently told CBS New York's Jenna DeAngelis.</p> <p>Bird flu is carried by free-flying waterfowl, such as ducks, geese and shorebirds, and infects chickens, turkeys, pheasants, quail, domestic ducks, geese and guinea fowl. In another major recent epidemic of the disease, it killed more than 50 million chickens and turkeys in 2014 and 2015, while causing economic losses of \$3.3 billion, the USDA estimates. The agency is now researching a potential vaccine against the bird flu.</p> <p>The cost of processed eggs — used in liquid or powdered form in manufactured products including salad dressing, cake mix and chips — has also surged, adding to inflationary pressures.</p> <p>The public health risk related to bird flu remains low, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Still, cooking all poultry and eggs to an internal temperature of 165 °F is advised as a general food safety rule.</p> <p>The Consumer Price Index — a closely watched inflation gauge — rose 7.1% in December from the previous year. Falling prices for energy, commodities and used cars offset increases in food and shelter.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/09 Russia cracks down opposition critics
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SOURCE	https://www.voanews.com/a/russia-launches-criminal-probes-of-prominent-kremlin-critics-/6911204.html
GIST	<p>Russian authorities on Monday announced parallel criminal probes against a famous actor critical of the war in Ukraine and a philanthropist who supports the Russian opposition, the latest in a months-long, sweeping crackdown on dissent.</p> <p>Russia's Investigative Committee said in a statement that its chief Alexander Bastrykin ordered the launch of a criminal case against Russian film and theater actor Artur Smolyaninov, who left the country after Moscow's forces invaded Ukraine and repeatedly spoke out against the war.</p> <p>According to the statement, Smolyaninov "made a series of statements directed against Russia in an interview to a Western media outlet." The Investigative Committee didn't clarify which of Smolyaninov's actions constituted a criminal offense and what charges it would bring against him.</p> <p>Smolyaninov's most recent interview last week sparked outrage among Kremlin supporters. The actor told the Novaya Gazeta Europe that if he had to fight in the war, he would fight "on the side of Ukraine." He said, "For me, it is on the side of my brothers who were attacked by my other brothers."</p> <p>Kremlin spokesman Dmitry Peskov on Monday welcomed a probe against Smolyaninov, noting that it is "important that our relevant [law enforcement] bodies think about these remarks."</p> <p>The probe against Smolyaninov comes amid increasingly harsh rhetoric about Russians who left the country because of the war.</p> <p>Lawmakers have suggested seizing the property of those who moved abroad or increasing taxes on those who continue to work remotely for Russian companies. Others have simply condemned them as "traitors."</p> <p>Separately, Russia's Interior Ministry placed prominent philanthropist Boris Zimin on an international most wanted list on fraud charges, officials said Monday. Zimin has funded several Russian independent media outlets as well as projects on imprisoned opposition leader Alexey Navalny.</p> <p>Zimin, who reportedly left Russia in 2015, was placed on Russia's register of people considered as "foreign agents" in September.</p> <p>Navalny, the Kremlin's fiercest foe, said that it was Zimin who paid 79,000 euros for his medical evacuation to Berlin in August 2020, when he was poisoned with a nerve agent and lay in a coma in the Siberian city of Omsk.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/10 Russia attacks Ukraine mining town
SOURCE	https://www.reuters.com/world/ukraine-fights-russian-assault-salt-mining-town-along-eastern-front-2023-01-09/
GIST	<p>KYIV, Jan 10 (Reuters) - Russian troops have stepped up an assault on the small salt mining town of Soledar in eastern Ukraine, forcing Ukrainian troops to repel waves of attacks led by mercenary forces, officials in Kyiv said.</p> <p>Britain said on Tuesday that Russian and forces of the Wagner contract group were probably now in control of most of the town, in the industrial Donbas region, after advances in the last four days.</p> <p>Seizing Soledar would be advantageous to Russian forces as they fight for control of the city of Bakhmut, a few kilometres (miles) to the southwest, where troops from both sides have been taking heavy losses in some of the most intense trench warfare since Russia invaded Ukraine nearly 11 months ago.</p> <p>It would also give Russia a welcome battlefield victory after a series of setbacks in recent months.</p>

"Russia's Soledar axis is highly likely an effort to envelop Bakhmut from the north, and to disrupt Ukrainian lines of communication," Britain's Defence Ministry said in an intelligence briefly.

Serhiy Cherevaty, spokesman for Ukraine's eastern forces, told Ukrainian television Russian forces were deploying their best Wagner fighters at Soledar, which had been struck 86 times by artillery over the past 24 hours.

He said Russia was using World War One-style tactics, throwing large numbers of men into battle and absorbing heavy losses.

"This is basically not a 21st-century war," he said.

Prominent journalist Yuriy Butusov, who is embedded with Ukrainian troops in Soledar, wrote for the online outlet New Voice that Russian forces had established fire control over the main Ukrainian supply route to the town.

"This is not a complete encirclement, but normal supply along the route is impossible, (and) this is critical for defence," he said.

Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said in his nightly video address on Monday that Bakhmut and Soledar were holding on despite widespread destruction.

He cited new and fiercer attacks in Soledar, where he said no walls have been left standing and the land was covered with Russian corpses.

Bakhmut is located on a strategic supply line between the Donetsk and Luhansk regions, which make up the Donbas. Gaining control of it could give Russia a stepping stone to advance on two bigger cities - Kramatorsk and Sloviansk.

Russia's defence ministry did not mention either Soledar or Bakhmut in a media briefing on Monday.

WAVES OF ATTACKS

Wagner was founded by Yevgeny Prigozhin, an ally of Russian President Vladimir Putin. Drawing some recruits [from Russia's prisons](#) and known for uncompromising [violence](#), it is active in conflicts [in Africa](#) and has taken a prominent role in Russia's war effort in Ukraine.

Prigozhin has been trying to capture Bakhmut and Soledar for months at the cost of many lives on both sides.

He said on Saturday [its significance](#) lay in a network of cavernous mining tunnels below the ground, which can hold troops or tanks.

Ukrainian military analyst Oleh Zhdanov said fighting in Bakhmut and Soledar was "the most intense on the entire frontline".

"So many remain on the battlefield ... either dead or wounded," he said on YouTube. "They attack our positions in waves, but the wounded as a rule die where they lie, either from exposure as it is very cold or from blood loss."

Reuters could not verify the battlefield reports.

In an evacuee centre in Kramatorsk, Olha, 60, said she had fled Soledar after moving from apartment to apartment as each was destroyed in tank battles.

"There isn't one house left intact. Apartments were burning, breaking in half," said Olha, who gave only her first name.

APPEAL FOR WEAPONS

Ukrainian officials, led by the commander in chief General Valery Zaluzhnyi, have warned that Russia is preparing fresh troops for a new offensive on Ukraine, possibly on the capital Kyiv.

Zelenskiy has repeatedly urged Ukraine's Western supporters to supply more sophisticated weapons to help it repel attacks and eventually expel Russian troops.

"The world knows that every day of Russian presence on Ukrainian soil means deaths, injuries, pain and suffering of people," he wrote in a message on Telegram on Tuesday morning, under pictures of Ukrainian soldiers.

"Ukraine must get everything it needs to expel terrorists from our land and to reliably protect our people from any Russian escalation plans."

France, Germany and the United States all [pledged](#) last week to send armoured fighting vehicles. Britain is considering supplying Ukraine with [tanks for the first time](#), Sky News reported, citing a Western source. Britain's Defence Ministry did not comment.

Russia launched what it calls a "special military operation" in Ukraine on Feb. 24, citing threats to its own security and a need to protect Russian speakers. Ukraine and its allies accuse Moscow of an unprovoked war to seize territory.

Moscow has also cast the conflict as a fight between Russia and hostile Western nations.

"The events in Ukraine are not a clash between Moscow and Kyiv - this is a military confrontation between Russia and NATO, and above all the United States and Britain," Russian Security Council Secretary [Nikolai Patrushev](#) said on Tuesday.

"The Westerners' plans are to continue to pull Russia apart, and eventually just erase it from the political map of the world," Patrushev, one of Putin's closest allies, told the Argumenti i Fakti newspaper in an interview.

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HEADLINE	01/10 California storms death toll rises to 14
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/climate-environment/2023/01/10/california-storms-flooding-evacuation-montecito/
GIST	<p>Heavy rain will continue to fall over California on Tuesday, weather officials said, as the ongoing bout of strong storms ravages the state, causing flash flooding, toppled trees, at least 14 fatalities and sweeping away a 5-year-old boy who remains missing.</p> <p>Thunderstorms drifting east from the Pacific Ocean are expected to come onshore early Tuesday, with the heavy rains that have hit central parts of the state moving into Southern California. Up to 7 inches of additional rainfall are expected "over the next few days," the National Weather Service said, adding that "no significant letup" was expected.</p> <p>Officials warned residents living near Los Angeles and San Diego that they face a heightened risk of flash flooding and mudslides. Gusts of 60 miles per hour or more were also forecast for San Luis Obispo County. Parts of Highway 101, which runs along the West Coast, were due closed to flooding late Monday, officials said.</p> <p>Santa Barbara County issued shelter-in-place orders for some areas and will close all public schools Tuesday. An evacuation order was imposed for Montecito, an affluent town in the county that is home to Prince Harry and Meghan, the Duchess of Sussex. Ellen DeGeneres, also a resident, posted a video urging her neighbors to flee.</p>

In downtown Los Angeles, some 100 miles east of Santa Barbara County, the rain had submerged parked cars late Monday, according to [photos](#) that circulated on social media. One L.A. resident reported that a pool, which had been drained for maintenance, had filled up with rainwater. Flights were delayed at Los Angeles International Airport, a spokeswoman said.

The death toll from the recent storms rose to 14 as of Monday afternoon, [according to the office of Gov. Gavin Newsom \(D\)](#) — more than the number of lives lost to wildfires in the past two years combined. President Biden agreed to Newsom’s request for a declaration of a state of emergency, paving the way for more federal assistance.

The ongoing deluge is due to an atmospheric river, a tongue of deep tropical moisture that is present over the state every winter. They can carry more than a billion pounds of moisture overhead every second. The current stretch is the result of a steady west-to-east jetflow that has pushed the rivers into California.

In Central California, a 5-year-old boy was reported missing after the car he and his mother were in was swept into a nearby creek, [police said](#). Neighbors rescued the mother, but the boy was swept downstream toward the Salinas River, according to police. Authorities mounted a search that was halted due to safety reasons.

The National Weather Service noted that the rains come after a recent drought, with recent precipitation in the state at between 400 and 600 percent above average levels. This filled up depleted water reservoirs, which “are now above their historical average levels,” the service added. Usually, much of California’s rain [runs off into the ocean or is uncollected](#).

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HEADLINE	01/10 Iran economic woes add fuel to protests
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/01/10/iran-protests-economy-mahsa-amini/
GIST	<p>As the cost of rent kept rising in Tehran, the software programmer and his wife knew it was time to leave. So they, like many other young couples, packed up their belongings in late 2020 and moved to a town outside the capital.</p> <p>Are you on Telegram? Subscribe to our channel for the latest updates on Russia’s war in Ukraine. Rent was cheaper there, but the housing was poorly constructed because of rapid growth. There were no schools or playgrounds nearby. Even the most basic services were a commute away.</p> <p>Two years later, their economic situation has only gotten worse. The programmer, 38, says the idea of owning a home in the satellite town is a distant dream; he had hoped to buy a used car, but even the three-year-old Kia hatchback he had his eye on is out of reach. With the money he and his wife, a 38-year old nurse, put away each month, it would take more than two years to afford the car.</p> <p>“I feel rage, rage and a lack of hope. It’s desperation,” said the programmer in a telephone interview. Like others in this story, he spoke on the condition of anonymity, fearing government retribution.</p> <p>“And if we go out to protest they crack down in the worst and most reprehensible way,” he said. “We really don’t know what to do. We can’t protest. We can’t improve our situation.”</p> <p>For nearly four months, Iran has been rocked by protests following the death of Mahsa Amini, a 22-year old woman, in the custody of the “morality police” last September. What began as a movement focused on women’s rights quickly morphed into a broader uprising against the strictures of the Islamic Republic, with demonstrators calling for greater cultural and political freedom, and an end to the abuses of the security state.</p> <p>But economic grievances are also fueling the unrest, observers and protesters say. Discontent has risen sharply since last spring when costs began soaring and the value of the currency crashed against the dollar,</p>

hitting record lows in December. Inflation topped 48 percent last month, according to government figures — the highest its been since 1995 — and most Iranians are having to make do with less. For many households, staples like meat and eggs have become luxuries.

“The first effect this inflation has is on people’s livelihood,” Saeed Leylaz, an economist and political analyst based in Tehran, said in a telephone interview. “The government hasn’t been able to do anything to reduce inflation until now because of corruption.”

The Islamic Republic has long been plagued by economic mismanagement, analysts say. But the situation got dramatically worse after President Trump pulled out of a multilateral nuclear deal in 2018 and imposed a series of harsh sanctions on the country. Iran has struggled to find buyers for its oil, the country’s main export. In late 2019, a hike in fuel prices sparked widespread protests and a deadly government crackdown.

Many ordinary Iranians had hoped a new U.S. administration would restore the nuclear deal and offer sanctions relief. But the current protests, and the heavy-handed state response, have further complicated negotiations.

“I would say it’s not completely dead,” said Djavad Salehi-Isfahani, a professor of economics at Virginia Tech. “If the two sides want it, nothing fundamental has shifted. What has shifted is the scene, and that scene is repairable,” he added, referring to the uprising.

But Iran’s clerical rulers have shown no indication they are willing to consider reforms that might calm the unrest, despite international pressure. Security forces have killed more than 500 people and arrested some 19,000, according to the activist news agency HRANA. Four men have been executed in connection with the protests.

As the repression deepens, ordinary Iranians are struggling to make ends meet. A young man in Tehran who works as a driver for Snapp, a popular ride-sharing app that is similar to Uber, said business has fallen steeply since the protests started because the government has restricted internet access to prevent protesters from communicating and uploading videos and pictures of the crackdown.

“When the internet was cut and there was no access to the applications, my income was severely reduced,” said the young man. “The situation hasn’t improved, at least for me.”

His business has taken an additional hit, he said, because some protesters stopped using ride-shares, suspecting the drivers were informing on them to security agencies.

“Repression is costly,” said Ali Vaez, Iran project director for the International Crisis Group. “So is the self-inflicted wound of shutting down the internet, which has driven hundreds of thousands out of the job market.”

Ethnic minority parts of Iran, such as the Kurdish region in the west and the Baluch region in the southeast, have been hit even harder.

In the past, Chiman, a 37-year old from Mahabad in the Kurdish region, had a job in sales that allowed her to pay for her own health care and clothes, even splurge on music classes and membership at a pool. Now, she has no steady income and has lost her health insurance.

She relies on her family for food, though inflation means they can only afford a fraction of the meat, fish and fruit that was once plentiful in their household. It is all the more upsetting, she said, because the Kurdish region is rich in farmland, but has suffered from years of discrimination and disinvestment.

“I have a sense of insecurity, deep anxiety and anger. I have no hope in the future,” said Chiman. “One of the main reasons for the protests is these economic problems.”

In late December, the government appointed a new head of the central bank, an apparent attempt to stave off a free fall in the currency, but it is unlikely to have much impact in the short term, observers say.

For many Iranians, there is only one solution left. “After 44 years, people are seeing that there’s not even the smallest amount of rationality in the authorities, and there’s not the smallest hope for reform,” said the programmer in the town near Tehran.

“Now the only discussion is about overthrowing the government.”

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HEADLINE	01/09 China's Covid crisis impact to world
SOURCE	https://www.wired.com/story/china-covid-crisis/
GIST	<p>AFTER NEARLY THREE years of strict restrictions to keep cases to a minimum, the Chinese government announced last month that it was ending its zero Covid policy—unleashing the biggest coronavirus outbreak the world has ever seen.</p> <p>Across a population that’s both undervaccinated and underexposed to the virus, up to 250 million people may have been infected in the first 20 days of December alone, according to a leaked estimate from Chinese health officials. In the eastern province of Zhejiang, home to more than 64 million people, the provincial government has reported around 1 million new cases a day.</p> <p>Infections are likely to escalate further this month following the Lunar New Year on January 22. The event is the world’s largest annual migration, as Chinese people travel across the country to gather with friends and family. “There’s going to be about a billion infections in China this winter,” predicts Ben Cowling, an epidemiology professor at the University of Hong Kong. “Starting within the next two weeks, any village in China which has so far managed to avoid Covid is not going to avoid it for much longer.”</p> <p>Domestically, this viral surge is nothing short of a crisis. Grim reports tell of hospitals being overwhelmed and huge queues to crematoriums, with modelers predicting that nearly 2 million Chinese people could die this winter because of the country not being ready to fully open up. At the start of November, 60 percent of over-80s in China were either not vaccinated at all or not boosted with a third dose. “They made this decision to rapidly transition out of the pandemic without a high enough vaccine coverage, without hospitals being prepared, without antivirals stockpiled, and so on,” says Cowling.</p> <p>But outside of China, this surge of new cases may be less of a concern than first appears. Epidemiologists point out that there’s already significant ongoing transmission of the coronavirus in most countries, and so incoming Chinese travelers are unlikely to trigger a noticeable spike in local Covid cases. “There are a lot of cases in China, but they represent just a fraction of cases in terms of the global picture,” says Francois Balloux, director of the University College London Genetics Institute. “It’s a major problem for China, but I’m not convinced it’s a major problem for the rest of the world.”</p> <p>Nevertheless, Australia, France, India, Israel, Italy, Morocco, Spain, the UK, and the US have all announced mandatory Covid tests for inbound Chinese travelers. Morocco has imposed a complete travel ban. However, the European Union has said these measures are “unjustified,” given the higher levels of immunity in places such as Europe, and that the variants infecting people in China are the same as those circulating in the West.</p> <p>Since Omicron was identified in November 2021, possessing a collection of completely new mutations that made it substantially more transmissible than any variant seen before, virologists haven’t detected anything radically different. From BA.5, which circulated widely in the UK during summer 2022, to XBB.1.5, which is currently spreading rapidly in the US, every notable variant that has appeared within the past 14 months has been a subvariant of Omicron.</p> <p>The fear is that the sudden spread of Covid through a new population with relatively little prior exposure to the virus will lead to the emergence of a new “supervariant”—one that has the potential to change the</p>

face of the pandemic like the Alpha, Delta, and Omicron forms of the virus did before. But whether there's a significant risk of this happening isn't clear.

In 2020, Ravi Gupta, a professor of clinical microbiology at the University of Cambridge, published a [paper in the journal Nature](#) demonstrating that chronic SARS-CoV-2 infections—where the virus lingers and multiplies inside the body of someone whose immune system is compromised—provide the virus with a greater opportunity to evolve. “A billion new infections means more opportunity for more chronic infections,” says Gupta. “You’re upping the numbers game in favor of the virus to make new, potentially problematic variants.”

But Cowling argues that because the level of immunity is much lower in China than the rest of the world, it will be relatively easy for the virus to spread through the population without needing to evolve. He says that if a new supervariant were to emerge, it might be more likely to come from North America or Europe, where more people have built up immunity through both vaccination and prior infection.

“My gut instinct is that the risk of a major new variant is probably not higher in China,” Gupta says. “In the UK, for example, if Covid is going to continue circulating, it’s got to find a new direction and way around the immunity from previous waves of Omicron and all its subvariants, whereas in China it’s quite happily spreading anyway.”

Even if a new supervariant does appear, scientists are unsure whether it would be more or less virulent than what’s already out there. Last year, Gupta and his colleagues [showed that](#) Omicron is less lethal than its predecessors because it does not infect lung cells as efficiently. “Instead it infects nasal cells,” he says. “Omicron chose a pathway that exists in the upper airways, so it’s less severe and transmits very, very well.”

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HEADLINE	01/09 US acceptance of Covid vaccines rises
SOURCE	https://arstechnica.com/science/2023/01/us-acceptance-of-covid-vaccines-rises-now-like-other-western-democracies/
GIST	<p>COVID vaccines remain the safest way to reduce the chance that SARS-CoV-2 can put you in the hospital and are a critical component of the public health campaign against the pandemic. Yet, in the US, there has been lots of controversy and outright anger about attempts to expand vaccine use, and a substantial portion of the population appears to be avoiding the shots for political reasons.</p> <p>The extreme polarization of US politics hasn't gone away, and the controversy seems fresh in some politicians' minds, so it's easy to expect that vaccine hesitancy isn't going away. But an international survey on COVID vaccine attitudes suggests that the US has seen a large boost in COVID vaccine acceptance and now has attitudes similar to other Westernized democracies. Elsewhere in the world, the survey reveals clear regional patterns in vaccine acceptance, although there are oddities everywhere.</p> <p>Becoming typical</p> <p>The survey started in 2020 as a series of questions about whether people intended to get vaccines once they became available. In the intervening years, the people performing the survey have added several nations (now up to 23) and shifted the questions to account for the availability of vaccines, addition of boosters, and development of treatments for COVID-19. In all 23 countries, the survey involved a pool of 1,000 participants who were generally reflective of the country's population.</p> <p>The survey focuses on what it calls vaccine hesitancy, which it defines as not having gotten a dose if it's available or don't intend to get one once it is. Questions about the boosters took the same form but were specific to those who have already had vaccines.</p> <p>Overall, the news is good. Globally, the average vaccine hesitancy has dropped in each survey edition and is now just over 20 percent. That's right about where the US now finds itself, with just under 20 percent</p>

indicating they have not received a first shot. (That appears to be similar to the percentage having had at least one shot, calculated from CDC data.)

That also makes the US fairly typical of its peer group of Westernized democracies, which tend to be in the 15–20 percent vaccine-hesitancy range. Spain is on the low side, at 10 percent hesitancy, but rates rise as you move east across Europe, with Sweden and Germany above 20 percent. Poland has the highest rate of hesitancy among European democracies, at 36 percent, perhaps influenced by neighboring Russia, where hesitancy nears 40 percent. The US is now typical among this group primarily due to a rise of about 20 percent in people having reported getting vaccinated over the last year alone.

There's no clear pattern when it comes to boosters. France, where vaccine hesitancy was under 20 percent, saw booster hesitancy of over 25 percent, and Germany saw booster hesitancy of only 11 percent. So, while local factors seem to matter most here, it's clear that we can't expect that any messaging that worked for vaccines will automatically carry over to boosters.

Spanning the globe

The rest of the globe is sparsely represented by comparison, and the countries included mostly highlight the exceptions. For example, South American countries (Brazil, Ecuador, and Peru) tended to have vaccine hesitancy of about 10 percent, while just north of there in Mexico, hesitancy was more than double at over 26 percent. Acceptance in East and South Asia was very high (from 11 percent hesitancy in South Korea to under 2 percent in India), whereas it was much lower in African countries, where the best results, in Nigeria, were nearly 30 percent hesitancy.

Notably, South Africa saw a 20 percent drop in vaccine acceptance—the largest in the survey—and over half of its population now expresses vaccine hesitancy. South Korea is also unusual, in that, despite its high level of vaccine acceptance, 27 percent of the participants there report being hesitant about boosters, which is second only to Russia.

It's important to note that, for many of the countries with lower GDPs, people are still answering the question without really having the option of getting vaccinated. More equitable vaccine access may allow more people in these countries to get vaccinated despite their hesitancy. Elsewhere, other research has identified vaccine misinformation, lower education levels, and mistrust of science and government as factors driving hesitancy.

Medical education appears to be especially effective at driving vaccine acceptance, with only 4.6 percent of those employed as health care workers expressing hesitancy—a number that's still falling.

Another thing that's trending upward with familiarity is the willingness of parents to have their children vaccinated. Globally, that rose slightly and is now at roughly 70 percent.

Mandates and treatments

Support for vaccine mandates has been falling, though they are still supported by most of those polled. The degree of support tended to correlate with vaccine acceptance: highest in India, and lowest in South Africa.

Globally, support for vaccine mandates for employees, students, and indoor activity was around 60 percent; it rose to 70 percent for international travelers. Drops in support from the previous year were in the area of five percent. But exceptions abounded. Support for every class of mandate went up by 5 to 10 percent in the US, while support for most mandates fell by double digits in France, even as the French support for an international travel mandate actually grew. Again, local context appears to be critical, and you can't really assume anything based on global trends.

Another issue the survey addressed was the availability of targeted therapies, which have expanded over the course of the pandemic. Here, availability was extremely erratic. The US, Canada, and Singapore saw roughly half the patients that received treatment getting Paxlovid, generally considered the most effective

	<p>therapy at the moment. By contrast, 70–80 percent of the people in South America who were treated received ivermectin, which is generally regarded as completely ineffective.</p> <p>Overall, the survey indicates that local adjustments in health messaging are critical, as there were exceptions in every group of countries, whether they're divided up based on geography, GDP, or other factors. In general, however, the global trend is toward wider vaccination acceptance.</p> <p>It's a trend that appears to include the US, where vaccination has been tied up in political polarization. It's also notable that support for vaccine mandates also grew across the board there, such that almost all mandates asked about are supported by the majority of the US and, in most cases, support is growing to the point where it's now considerably higher than in Germany and France. With much of the reporting on the topic emphasizing mandates as a political strategy, it's easy to lose track of the widespread public support.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/09 Russia forced to address new draft rumors
SOURCE	https://www.usnews.com/news/world-report/articles/2023-01-09/russia-forced-to-address-new-draft-rumors-for-planned-ukraine-offensive
GIST	<p>The Kremlin on Monday discouraged Russians from believing rumors it is about to press another half-million men into military service in Ukraine ahead of a reported late-winter offensive – without explicitly denying those plans.</p> <p>When asked about the rumors spreading on social media of a second mass mobilization, Russian President Vladimir Putin’s spokesman Dmitry Peskov told reporters early Monday that “there is no need to attach such importance to Telegram channels in general,” referencing the popular platform. Peskov added that official authorities remain the primary source of information the Russian citizens should believe, saying of the online channels, “There is no need to exaggerate,” according to a translation of his remarks.</p> <p>“Everything has been said many times” about a proposed second wave of conscripted forces, he added, referencing statements from Putin and others that Russia does not currently need to resume a mobilization.</p> <p>Peskov’s comments come at a contentious time for Russia. It faces new challenges on the ground 10 months after its latest invasion and is still reeling from the devastating effects of ordering the mobilization of 300,000 new troops in the fall to send into the fighting. Moscow’s last military draft – at a time Ukrainian forces edged back ill-equipped and poorly led Russian troops from key positions – prompted hundreds of thousands of young men to try to flee Russia while those who stayed behind endured the widespread shortages and logistical failures that have plagued the Russian military.</p> <p>Several Ukrainian and European intelligence officials have warned in recent days that Russia is preparing for another mobilization to address its latest battlefield failures. They assess that Putin, in his attempt to restore Russia’s imperial control over all of Ukraine, believes Russians are prepared to endure more suffering even as he faces growing condemnation at home for bungling military operations.</p> <p>An official with Ukraine’s Main Military Intelligence Directorate, Andriy Cherniak, told Politico in a report posted Saturday that the new mobilization would center on seizing Ukraine’s large cities and bolstering Russian domestic industrial centers. Though Russia claimed it completed its 300,000 mobilization by the end of October, as planned, Cherniak asserted it only effectively raised 150,000 new troops that have deployed into Ukraine, while the rest remain in training or deployed to the rear. He also claimed that Russia has continued a secret conscription operation in the months since then.</p> <p>Western officials and analysts believe Russia desperately seeks a strategic or tactical edge over Ukraine as its forces settle into entrenched positions in Ukraine’s east and south – near territory it began annexing when it first invaded in 2014. Sen. Angus King, Maine independent, told CBS’ “Face the Nation” on Sunday after joining a small congressional delegation to Ukraine that “what’s going on in the east is essentially trench warfare. It’s almost World War I. It’s horrible.”</p>

Reports have emerged in recent days that Russia may begin domestically manufacturing Iranian suicide drones that have terrorized Ukrainian civilian centers in recent months, even as its own stockpiles of missiles and rockets rapidly dwindles. Ukrainian officials say Russia will have depleted those stockpiles by early next year – around the time analysts believe it plans to launch a new push to regain territory.

Some signs emerged this week that Russian officials acknowledge the dismal position they face. Nikolai Patrushev, a former top Russian intelligence chief, close adviser to Putin and among those considered a possible successor to him, claimed in an interview published on Monday that Russia is not, in fact, at war with Ukraine but rather with NATO, which he says is propping up a murderous puppet regime in Kyiv – all well-trod Kremlin propaganda talking points.

But he added an appeal to the Ukrainian people that signaled a desire by Putin’s inner circle for a need to end the fighting.

“The sooner the citizens of Ukraine realize that the West is fighting against Russia with their hands, the more lives will be saved,” Patrushev said. “The West does not plan to save anyone’s life at the expense of its enrichment and other ambitions.”

Others, meanwhile, note that Putin is employing a strategy of patience, having first annexed the Crimean peninsula in 2014 when he also began supporting pro-Russian separatists in Ukraine’s east.

“For Putin, defeat is not an option,” Condoleezza Rice, former secretary of state, and Robert Gates, former CIA director and secretary of defense, wrote in [an op-ed](#) published by The Washington Post on Saturday.

The veterans of Republican presidential administrations warned that Russia’s current military position in Ukraine allows it to regroup and launch new destabilizing operations in the future. Kyiv, meanwhile, governs over a shattered country almost entirely propped up by Western aid.

“Count on Putin to be patient to achieve his destiny,” the pair wrote.

And they advocated for the Biden administration to capitalize even further on [new shifts in its willingness to support Ukraine](#) following the military aid package of unprecedented size that it announced last week, including tank-killing armored vehicles – at a time of growing dissent among far-right members of Congress against providing support to Kyiv.

“We agree with the Biden administration’s determination to avoid direct confrontation with Russia,” Rice and Gates concluded. “However, an emboldened Putin might not give us that choice. The way to avoid confrontation with Russia in the future is to help Ukraine push back the invader now.”

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HEADLINE	01/10 Peru: 17 dead in violent anti-govt. protests
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/10/peru-protests-deaths-fresh-clashes-as-calls-grow-for-president-boluarte-to-resign
GIST	<p>At least 17 people have been killed in fresh clashes between protesters and security forces in Peru as rolling anti-government protests turned deadly again, pushing the overall death toll to nearly 40 in the nationwide unrest after the ousting and arrest of former president Pedro Castillo a month ago.</p> <p>Monday’s bloodshed took place near the airport in the city of Juliaca in the southern region of Puno, as demonstrators fought running battles with police. Social media images showed gunshot wounds and clouds of smoke as protesters threw stones using slings and used metal plates as shields.</p> <p>Other footage appeared to show a man being given CPR and images of injured protesters arriving at the hospital. A boy died in an ambulance that had been blocked from reaching the hospital by protesters.</p>

The rising death toll comes amid growing protests calling for President Dina Boluarte to resign, Congress to be shuttered and Castillo to be freed from jail. Boluarte was Castillo's vice-president who replaced him after he attempted to [shutter Congress and rule by decree](#) on 7 December.

In a televised address late on Monday, Peru's prime minister, Alberto Otárola, defended the security forces' response, saying: "We will not cease in our defence of the rule of the law." Flanked by ministers, he claimed violent groups financed by "foreign interests and the dark money of drug trafficking" were trying to "destroy the country".

Otárola said the police had been attacked with homemade weapons, and that while he regretted the deaths he blamed Castillo's attempted "coup d'état" for stirring the unrest. He added his government was defending the "peace and tranquility of 33 million Peruvians".

Speaking at a "national agreement" meeting earlier on Monday with representatives from the country's regions, Boluarte said she could not grant some of the protesters' key demands and accused them of not understanding what they were asking for. "What you are asking for is a pretext to continue generating chaos," she said.

However, Peru's ombudsman's office said on Twitter: "We ask the forces of law and order to make a legal, necessary and proportional use of force and we urge the state prosecutor's office to carry out a prompt investigation to clarify the facts."

The International Committee of the Red Cross tweeted: "We are very concerned about the continued escalation of violence in the protests in Peru, which has led to the loss of dozens of lives."

Defence minister Jorge Luis Chavez said 75 police were among the injured. He said they had come under attack from firearms and explosives during a five-day assault in Juliaca near Peru's southern border with Bolivia.

But calls for Boluarte's resignation continue as Otárola and his cabinet faced a vote of confidence in congress later on Tuesday.

"Massacre after massacre does not solve absolutely anything," tweeted Javier Torres, editor of a regional news outlet Noticias Ser. "It is urgent to bring forward the elections as soon as possible and the resignation of Dina Boluarte!"

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HEADLINE	01/10 Day 321 of the Russia invasion
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/10/russia-ukraine-war-at-a-glance-what-we-know-on-day-321-of-the-invasion
GIST	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Britain is considering supplying a handful of Challenger 2 tanks to Ukraine, the first time a western country has indicated it may supply its homemade heavy armour to Kyiv in the war against Russia. No final decision by Downing Street has been made, British sources added, but Ukraine is hoping a positive move by the UK could help persuade Germany to follow suit later this month with its Leopard 2 battle tanks.• The US is reportedly considering sending Stryker armoured combat vehicles to Ukraine. The move could be announced next week, but no final decision has been made, Politico reported, citing two sources familiar with the matter.• Germany has no plans to send Leopard 2 tanks to Ukraine, a government spokesperson has said. Robert Habeck, Germany's economy minister, said on Sunday that Berlin could not rule out the delivery of Leopard tanks – which are heavier fighting vehicles than the Marders – to support Ukrainian military forces in the future.• Two British men have gone missing in Ukraine, the UK Foreign Office has said. The men were named in reports as volunteers Andrew Bagshaw and Christopher Parry. The pair were last known to have been travelling from Kramatorsk to Soledar on 6 January, according to Sky News.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Russian troops are making another attempt to advance on the town of Soledar in the eastern Donbas region, according to Ukraine's deputy defence minister, Hanna Maliar. Russian attacks in recent days have focused on Soledar in an apparent effort to cut off the town. The capture of Soledar, which lies to the north-east of Bakhmut, would put Ukrainian forces in the area in danger of being encircled and offer Russia a potential avenue of approach against that city. • Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskiy said in nightly video remarks on Monday that Bakhmut and Soledar were holding on despite widespread destruction. He cited new and fiercer attacks in Soledar, where he said no walls have been left standing and the land is covered with Russian corpses. "Thanks to the resilience of our soldiers in Soledar, we have won for Ukraine additional time and additional strength," Zelenskiy said. • Ukraine is reinforcing its positions around Bakhmut in the eastern Donbas region, after days of relentless assaults by Russian forces spearheaded by the Wagner mercenary group. Bakhmut and Soledar have been the focus of intense efforts by Moscow to make progress in an area where Russian forces have been trying desperately to advance since early summer. • Two women have been killed and six people injured, including a 10-year-old girl, after a Russian missile attack on a market in a village in eastern Ukraine on Monday morning, officials said. A 60-year-old was among two women killed after the missile slammed into the village market in Shevchenkove, about 80km (50 miles) south-east of the city of Kharkiv, regional prosecutors said. • Strong doubts have emerged over Russian claims to have killed 600 Ukrainian soldiers in barracks in Kramatorsk. Journalists visiting the city were unable to find evidence of large-scale casualties. However, the Kremlin said it was confident its defence ministry was correct when it said 600 Ukrainian service personnel had been "destroyed" in the attack. • The Kremlin has rejected a Ukrainian assertion that a senior Russian official has been floating the idea of a potential peace deal with European officials. Oleksiy Danilov, secretary of Ukraine's national security and defence council, told the country's public broadcaster on Thursday that Dmitry Kozak, deputy head of Russia's presidential administration, had been holding meetings with European officials in an attempt to force Kyiv to sign what he characterised as an unfavourable peace deal. • Italy will not make a decision on supplying new arms to Ukraine until next month, according to a report. Italian prime minister Giorgia Meloni faces resistance to the approval of a decree to send arms to Ukraine from her allies Matteo Salvini and Silvio Berlusconi, la Repubblica reported, as well as issues over cost considerations and military shortages. • China's newly appointed foreign minister, Qin Gang, spoke with his Russian counterpart, Sergei Lavrov, to discuss the "crisis" in Ukraine, the Chinese foreign ministry said. The ministry said Qin called for efforts to peacefully settle the crisis in Ukraine. • Ukraine's human rights commissioner will meet his Russian counterpart for talks in Turkey this week, news agencies from both countries reported. Tatiana Moskalkova, the Russian commissioner, was quoted by Interfax news agency as saying that the meeting with Ukraine's Dmytro Lubinets will take place during an international forum in Turkey between Thursday and Saturday. Talks are likely to include the possibility of further exchanges of prisoners of war.
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HEADLINE	01/09 Iran protesters seek to block executions
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/world/2023/jan/09/protest-iran-prison-karaj-executions
GIST	<p>Protesters have gathered outside a prison near the Iranian capital in an attempt to prevent the rumoured imminent execution of two young detainees found guilty of running over a police officer in a car during protests in November.</p> <p>Footage posted on social media showed the mother of one of the men, 22-year-old Mohammad Ghobadlou, pleading for her son outside Rajaei-Shahr prison in Karaj, a satellite city west of Tehran. She said it had been established that her son had not been at the scene when the police officer died.</p>

Human rights activists had raised the alarm after Ghobadlou and fellow prisoner Mohammad Boroughani were taken to solitary confinement, which is often a preliminary step before execution. Their lawyers are claiming the two men require a retrial in the supreme court.

Four people have been executed so far in relation to the protest movement that has swept Iran since the death in custody of Mahsa Amini in September. Some warnings of imminent executions have proved false, possibly because protests around specific prisoners have unnerved the authorities.

Iranian ambassadors in Europe are still being summoned over the execution of two men on Saturday, and Iran is now having to weigh up whether to ignore the international condemnation over the lack of due process, including prisoners being denied access to lawyers of their choice.

On Monday, a daughter of the former president Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani was sentenced to five years over “propaganda” and “acts against national security” for encouraging people to join the protests.

Faezeh Hashemi, 60, a former lawmaker and women’s rights activist, was charged with “collusion against national security, propaganda against the Islamic republic and disturbing public order by participating in illegal gatherings”, her lawyer said.

The repression, which is seen by the Iranian authorities as an appropriate response to injuries inflicted on security officers during the protests, is stifling any chances of the talks of a renewed nuclear deal, pushing part of the Iranian regime to look for closer relations with Russia as an alternative to the west.

Over the weekend the Canadian prime minister, Justin Trudeau, attended memorials in Toronto for the 176 people killed on Ukraine International Airlines flight 752 that was shot down by Iran’s Revolutionary Guards on 8 January 2020.

Trudeau said the Tehran regime did not represent its people, a position that takes him closer to expelling Iranian diplomats from Canada, one of the key demands of the protestors in the large and increasingly unified Iranian diaspora.

The execution of two men, Mohammad Mehdi Karami and Mohammad Hosseini, on Saturday led to protests around the world, but no immediate sanctions.

The French foreign minister, Catherine Colonna, described the executions as “appalling”, adding that France reiterated its opposition to the death penalty, in all places and in all circumstances. French senators have also tabled a resolution calling on the EU to end nuclear negotiations with Iran; designate the Revolutionary Guards as a terrorist organisation; as well as several other measures.

The Canadian foreign minister, Mélanie Joly, also denounced the executions, saying: “Two more lives lost to senseless executions from the Iranian regime.” Calling on Iran to put an end to such brutal and inhumane sentences, Joly expressed solidarity with Iranians who have a right to their human rights.

Nasrin Sotoudeh, a lawyer and human rights activist in Iran, said due process had not been allowed, turning the executions into “open murder”.

The Iranian foreign ministry rejected the criticism, saying: “Remarks of self-styled defenders of human rights are replete with racist thoughts.”

Iranian judicial news agencies reported that Saleh Mirhashemi, a karate champion, had been sentenced to death, along with two others. Amir Nasr Azadani, a former football player, was sentenced to 26 years in prison.

The Supreme Council of the Cultural Revolution meanwhile slammed the door on relaxing rules around the hijab, saying in a lengthy statement that western societies had destroyed the family by promoting female sexuality. “Covering up causes a woman to be recognised in society by her thoughts and

	personality, not by her body and beauty,” it said. “This is the greatest service that religions, especially Islam, have given to women, which obliges her to observe hijab so that her dignity is preserved and she is not sold or passed around like a commodity.”
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HEADLINE	01/10 Pakistan deports Afghan refugees
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2023/jan/10/pakistan-sends-back-hundreds-of-afghan-refugees-to-face-taliban-repression
GIST	<p>More than 600 Afghans have been deported from Pakistan in the past three days, and hundreds more face expulsion in a renewed crackdown on migrants.</p> <p>On Saturday, 302 people were sent back to Afghanistan from Sindh province and 303 on Monday, including 63 women and 71 children. A further 800 people are expected to be deported in the coming days.</p> <p>About 250,000 Afghans have arrived in Pakistan since the Taliban seized power in August 2021.</p> <p>Last summer, authorities began deporting Afghans for illegally entering the country, but arrests and detentions have increased since October. Nearly 1,400 Afghans, including 129 women and 178 children, have been detained in Karachi and Hyderabad alone, the largest number of arrests made to date in Pakistan, say lawyers.</p> <p>Pakistan has not adopted the UN Refugee Convention 1951, which confers a legal duty on countries to protect people fleeing serious harm.</p> <p>Moniza Kakar, a Karachi-based human rights lawyer, said nearly 400 of the arrested Afghans had valid visas on their passports or proof-of-residence cards, which they said were confiscated by police before they were jailed.</p> <p>Umer Ijaz Gilani, an Islamabad-based lawyer, said deporting Afghan asylum seekers was a “clear violation of the non-refoulement principle” (forcibly returning refugees or asylum seekers where they may be persecuted). He urged the Pakistan government’s National Commission for Human Rights (NCHR) to direct state authorities to stop the deportations.</p> <p>“The NCHR has the jurisdiction ... if it fails to exercise it, we might go to the high court,” said Gilani, who is supporting 100 Afghan human rights defenders seeking asylum in Islamabad. He said his clients were extremely disturbed about the arrests in Sindh.</p> <p>Farah Zia, the director of the independent Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, condemned the treatment of Afghans, particularly the arrests of women and children “because their vulnerability is compounded by their gender and age and lack of connections with local networks”.</p> <p>In December, leaked photos of imprisoned women and children in Karachi went viral.</p> <p>Last year, the commission wrote to the government, urging it to develop a more humane policy towards Afghan refugees.</p> <p>The Sindh authorities have defended their actions. “The government is only taking action against illegal immigrants; those living without a valid travel document,” said their spokesperson Murtaza Wahab.</p> <p>Nida Amiri*, a registered asylum seeker in Karachi, told of “sleepless nights” since the crackdown. Her husband, a prominent government official, is in hiding in Afghanistan. “I have headaches, and my blood pressure refuses to come down,” said Amiri, 47, who left Kabul in December 2021 and is now working as a cook.</p>

She added: “I would rather die in prison than return to Kabul, where we cannot even breathe freely.”

She has a registration card from the Society for Human Rights and Prisoners’ Aid (Sharp), which partners with the UN high commissioner for refugees (UNHCR) to initially assess asylum cases. But a Sharp employee said the card “cannot save her from being hauled in”.

Amiri’s 21-year old daughter, Afshaneh Noor, said that living in Pakistan may not be easy, but if she was sent back she would be “a prisoner in my home”. “It’s the worst place on Earth to be in for a woman, right now,” she said.

Her 14-year-old sister and nine-year-old brother are no longer allowed to go to school, she said, because their mother is so worried they’ll be detained. “She has told us to always carry the Sharp card and to avoid leaving the home unless absolutely necessary,” said Noor. “We tell people we are from Chitral [a region in northern Pakistan bordering Afghanistan].”

Nadera Najeeb*, 43, a widow and mother of six, belongs to the Hazara community, a predominantly Shia Muslim minority group persecuted by the Taliban. She entered Pakistan illegally with five of her children – two sons and three daughters – two months ago. “I was forced to run away, otherwise my daughters would be raped by the Taliban,” she said. Before leaving, she married her eldest daughter to a cousin’s son, leaving her in Kabul.

Najeeb, who works at a fishery in Karachi, has begun to wear a black *abaya* – a long, loose coat that covers her head and face so that only her eyes show. “This way no one can tell I’m an Afghan or belong to the Hazara community,” she said. “I took this difficult journey to keep my kids safe; if we’re put behind bars and then sent back, all this will be for nothing.”

Qaiser Khan Afridi, a UNHCR spokesperson, said the organisation is working to identify the most vulnerable asylum cases for resettlement, including women-headed households and families with children at risk. The UNHCR was striving to find “durable solutions” for refugees, but it was up to governments to grant asylum.

“Resettlement, unfortunately, cannot be available for the entire refugee population as the opportunities are limited,” he said.

**Names have been changed to protect identities*

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HEADLINE	01/09 Russian ship secret stopover South Africa
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/russian-ships-secretive-south-africa-stop-prompts-u-s-questions-11673265353?mod=hp_trending_now_article_pos2
GIST	<p>JOHANNESBURG—A Russian merchant ship whose owner has allegedly carried weapons for the Kremlin turned off its transponder last month before surreptitiously docking at South Africa’s largest naval base, where it delivered and loaded unidentified cargoes, according to witnesses and a senior U.S. official.</p> <p>South Africa has declined to say what the ship was carrying or what was loaded onto it at the Simon’s Town navy base. The country’s defense minister shrugged off U.S. concerns, saying Washington “threatens Africa, not just South Africa, of having anything that is even smelling of Russia.”</p> <p>The visit by the ship, the Lady R, owned by Russian shipping company MG-FLOT LLC, has strained relations between Washington and Pretoria. It also demonstrates the difficulty for the U.S. and its allies of enforcing sanctions against Moscow.</p> <p>MG-FLOT didn’t respond to emails sent to addresses listed online seeking comment. The Russian Embassy in Pretoria and the Kremlin also didn’t respond to emailed requests for comment.</p>

A senior U.S. official said Washington was concerned by the support the South African armed forces provided to the Lady R, including allowing it to enter and move cargo at a naval base while its automatic identification system was switched off.

For two nights, during which Simon's Town was plunged into darkness by nationwide power cuts, a mobile crane moved crates off and onto the 122-meter-long vessel under the watch of armed guards, according to witnesses and photos viewed by The Wall Street Journal.

"There is no publicly available information on the source of the containers that were loaded onto the Lady R," the U.S. official said.

The Lady R left Simon's Town the morning of Dec. 9. When the ship started transmitting a position again in the evening of that day, it was anchored more than 100 miles east of Simon's Town, tracking services showed.

Since mid-December, the vessel has been anchored off the coast of Mozambique, where it pulled into the port of Beira over the weekend, according to ship-tracking services, which give its destination as Istanbul. From Istanbul, it is a relatively short trip to Russian [Black Sea](#) ports.

Kobus Marais, a lawmaker and defense spokesman for South Africa's opposition Democratic Alliance, said he was told that the Lady R delivered ammunition from Russia, although that would normally be imported through commercial ports, he said.

The U.S. imposed sanctions on the Lady R and MG-FLOT on May 8, when the company was using the name Transmorflot LLC. Washington said the company and its vessels had been shipping weapons for the Russian government.

In November, when the U.S. learned that the Lady R was headed toward South Africa, the U.S. Embassy alerted the South African government to the fact that the vessel was under sanctions, the senior U.S. official said.

Under U.S. law, [Washington can sanction](#) any entity, person or country that provides services to a sanctioned vessel.

The embassy received no response to its alert on the Lady R from the South African government, the official said.

Vessel-tracking services indicate that the Lady R switched off its automatic transponders, which relay a ship's identity and position to other vessels and maritime authorities. Two South African navy tugboats helped it to a berth at the Simon's Town base near Cape Town, according to witnesses.

Witnesses said they saw trucks with escort vehicles carrying shipping containers onto the base at night. One resident said she was chased down Simon's Town's empty streets after she tried to follow an empty truck leaving the base.

In a media briefing on Dec. 22, Defense Minister Thandi Modise said she was awaiting paperwork with more information on the shipment before she could comment on why the Lady R docked at the base and what was taken off and loaded onto the vessel.

"Whatever contents this vessel was getting were ordered long before Covid," Ms. Modise said, before calling out what she said was unjustified U.S. pressure on African countries that [maintained relations with Russia](#).

A spokesman for Ms. Modise didn't respond to calls and messages seeking comment on the presence of the Lady R at the Simon's Town base and the statements from the senior U.S. official. The South African armed forces also didn't respond to requests for comment.

Darren Olivier, director of African Defence Review, a defense analysis and consulting company, said it was plausible that the Lady R was delivering an old order of ammunition from Russia. In 2020, South Africa authorized the import of 4.5 million rounds of Russian ammunition worth around \$585,000.

It is less clear what could have been loaded onto the ship, Mr. Olivier said. "South Africa's defense industry does not generally produce armaments and complete systems that are used by the Russian military," he said.

Russia could be interested in dual use items such as guidance and control systems and optics that could be used to produce [aerial drones](#), Mr. Olivier said.

South Africa's ruling African National Congress has close relations with Moscow dating back to the Soviet Union's support for its fight against white-minority rule. Like many other African countries, South Africa has [tried to take a neutral stance](#) on the war in Ukraine. President Cyril Ramaphosa has held talks with both U.S. President Biden and Russian President [Vladimir Putin](#) since the war started.

In February, South Africa is scheduled to host a joint exercise with the Russian and Chinese navies.

MG-FLOT and several of its vessels have run into trouble with international authorities in the past. Another vessel owned by MG-FLOT, the Lana, was detained in April offshore Greece, according to Greek shipping authorities, which cited European Union sanctions on Russia.

The U.S. then used a court order to confiscate part of the ship's cargo, which Washington said has separately sanctioned oil from Iran. After Greek authorities released the vessel in exchange for two Greek tankers being held by Iran, the Lana delivered its remaining oil cargo to the Syrian government of Bashar al-Assad, according to shipping trackers.

In July, another MG-FLOT vessel was detained in Kochi, India, where it delivered munitions to the Indian navy, according to a court in Kochi. The vessel was detained after it allegedly failed to pay fuel bills to an Estonian company, the court said at the time.

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HEADLINE	01/09 How long do flu symptoms last?
SOURCE	https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-long-do-flu-symptoms-last-how-long-contagious-11673047843?mod=hp_listc_pos3
GIST	<p>Many people are experiencing the particular misery of the flu for the first time in several years. After two years of milder flu seasons, here is a reminder of what the flu is—and what to do if you get it.</p> <p>This flu season hit earlier and harder than those of the past couple of years, doctors say. The reason is likely because of the cyclical nature of the flu and the lifting of Covid precautions such as working from home, wearing masks and having smaller social gatherings, says Robert Frenck, a pediatrician in the division of infectious diseases at Cincinnati Children's hospital in Ohio.</p> <p>We asked doctors what to expect this year if the influenza virus causes illness in your household.</p> <p>Which symptoms are most common?</p> <p>The hallmark symptoms of the flu are fever, headache, chills and body aches, says Dr. Frenck. Sore throat and cough are typical, too, he says.</p> <p>But not everyone who has the flu will get a fever, says Ryan Mire, an internal medicine physician in Nashville, Tenn., and president of the American College of Physicians.</p>

In children, the influenza virus can infect the digestive system and cause diarrhea, says Tochi Iroku-Malize, a family doctor in Islip, N.Y., and president of the American Academy of Family Physicians.

[Symptoms of the flu](#) tend to come on suddenly, within a day or even hours. “It is such a sudden change, they can usually pinpoint around the exact time they started to feel bad,” says Dr. Mire. That is distinct from other viruses such as the common cold, where symptoms tend to come on more gradually, he says.

And unlike a cold, you’re less likely to be able to power through symptoms. “You feel terrible,” says Dr. Frenck. “You just want to get in bed and pull the covers over your head.”

How long do flu symptoms last?

On average, the crushing fever, chills and body aches tend to last between three and five days, says Dr. Frenck. But fatigue and cough can linger for up to three weeks, he says.

Dr. Mire notes that the trajectory of flu is highly individual and unpredictable.

“I’ve had people feel better after 72 hours and patients who have felt really bad and could not go to work for almost two weeks,” he says. Whether you’ve had your flu shot, how robust your immune system is and how big of a dose of the virus you got can all influence how intense your symptoms are and how long they persist.

Why can flu symptoms last so long?

People with the flu can start to feel better and then take a turn for the worse, often between days 10 and 14, says Dr. Frenck.

For those who have this worsening of symptoms, it may signal a secondary bacterial infection, such as pneumonia. Pneumonia is often characterized by a return of fever and a worsening cough, sometimes accompanied with difficulty breathing. People can also develop ear or sinus infections or even encephalitis, which occurs when the influenza virus gets into the spinal fluid and can cause confusion and other symptoms, says Dr. Mire.

Dr. Iroku-Malize says that if you’re having any trouble breathing, are unable to eat or drink, or if you’ve been improving and then symptoms worsen, see your doctor.

It is secondary infections, particularly pneumonia, that are often what land people in the hospital and can lead to flu deaths, doctors say. Secondary bacterial infections from influenza need to be treated with antibiotics.

For how long are you contagious when you have the flu?

People shed the flu virus for about four to five days, says Seema Lakdawala, associate professor of microbiology and immunology at Emory University School of Medicine who studies influenza transmission.

But the tricky thing with flu is that you are contagious starting about 24 hours before you show symptoms, says Dr. Lakdawala.

Fever is associated with high viral loads, says Dr. Mire, so people are highly contagious while they have a fever. He advises his patients to stay home until they are fever-free, without using any fever-reducing medications, for at least 24 hours. After that, they are much less likely to be contagious.

Dr. Lakdawala notes that since the H3N2 version of flu that is circulating this year is more commonly transmitted via close contact, wearing masks, increasing ventilation and social distancing will cut the possibility of spreading the virus.

People generally will become infected about one to two days after being exposed to the influenza virus. “If you don’t have any symptomatic onset within three to four days [of being exposed to someone with the flu], you’re probably in the clear,” she says.

How is the flu treated?

Other than rest and fluids, doctors recommend treating the individual symptoms. For fever and body aches, for example, Dr. Iroku-Malize says your doctor may recommend acetaminophen and ibuprofen. Some people get relief from congestion from mentholated topical rubs, she says.

Antiviral medications such as Tamiflu can cut the duration of flu symptoms by a day or two. The drugs also reduce the risk of complications such as secondary infections and hospitalization. Doctors recommend antivirals for people at high risk for flu complications including people aged 65 and older and those with chronic health conditions such as diabetes and heart disease. Taking antivirals within the first 48 hours of symptoms is most effective, says Dr. Mire. The most common side effect of the drugs is nausea and vomiting.

If you have symptoms of flu and are at increased risk of complications, it is important to get tested for flu so you can get a diagnosis and start treatment in time for antivirals to be most effective.

Is there anything else I can do to lessen my odds of getting the flu?

Doctors emphasize the importance of getting your flu shot, which reduces the risk of infection and of complications if you do catch the virus. The vaccine is particularly important for older adults, young children, pregnant women and people with other health conditions.

And it isn’t too late to get your shot this year, says Dr. Frenck. He notes that flu activity is typically highest in January and February. Also, two main types of flu circulate, type A and type B. Even if you’ve already had the flu recently, you can still get the other type, he says.

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HEADLINE	01/09 Dramatic rise activity China funeral homes
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/2023/01/09/china-crematorium-covid-deaths/
GIST	<p>An overwhelmed funeral home in Chengdu, China, stopped offering memorial services, budgeting just two minutes for each family to say goodbye to loved ones before cremation. A funeral parlor on the outskirts of Beijing quickly cleared space for a new parking lot. Scalpers in Shanghai sold places in line at funeral homes for \$300 a pop to grieving relatives trying to get cremation slots.</p> <p>Still, the Chinese government continues to insist that fewer than 40 people have died in China of covid since Dec. 7, when “zero covid” restrictions aimed at entirely eliminating the virus were suddenly dropped — and infection numbers exploded.</p> <p>A Washington Post examination of satellite imagery, firsthand videos posted to social media and witness accounts suggests that China’s covid death toll is far higher than the government’s tally, undermining Beijing’s claim that the outbreak remains under control.</p> <p>Funeral homes across the country have seen a dramatic increase in activity compared with a few months ago and with the same time last year, as vehicles deliver bodies and residents line up to have their loved ones cremated, according to The Post’s analysis. It provides clear visual evidence that official records do not reflect the full toll of the outbreak.</p> <p>Imagery captured by Maxar Technologies and provided to The Post showed an uptick in activity at funeral homes across six different cities, from Beijing in the north to Nanjing in the east, to Chengdu and Kunming in the southwest.</p> <p>The imagery is consistent with interviews The Post conducted with mourning Chinese residents and funeral home workers. Social media posts verified by The Post reveal long wait times and overwhelmed</p>

staff at additional facilities. In all of the areas analyzed, the official death toll announced by authorities was in the single digits — if reported at all.

“I have worked here for six years and it has never been this busy,” said a receptionist at the Jiangnan Funeral Home in Chongqing in southwest China who described long lines of cars waiting to get into the facility during the days just before and after Christmas. The freezers were full and all eight incinerators were operating 24/7, she said.

“The phone has basically not stopped ringing,” she said, hanging up before she could give her name.

In China, when a family member dies at home or in the hospital, relatives typically call a funeral home or a third party to pick up the body. They register, often in person, with a death certificate and identification of their late relative before being assigned a time slot for the cremation — the main way the deceased are handled in Chinese cities — and memorial service.

It is not uncommon for funeral homes to be busier during the winter months. But the volume of traffic seen in satellite imagery, along with videos and photos showing a crush of people waiting inside and outside these facilities, suggest activity beyond that seen during comparable periods over the past year.

Distinctive vans commonly used as hearses were among vehicles identified in satellite footage and videos verified by The Post. Footage of long lines at night outside funeral homes indicates that some family members have waited overnight to make arrangements for their deceased.

Demand has become so high that at least four of the funeral homes contacted by The Post have stopped allowing memorial services and are now offering only cremation services and storage, an indication that the majority of people waiting at these facilities were there to process recently deceased loved ones.

Exactly how Chinese authorities count covid deaths has been a point of contention since the start of the pandemic. Since December, only people who died of respiratory failure have been included in the official count, regardless of whether they tested positive for the virus. Chinese health officials have tried to reassure the public by citing the [low fatality rate](#), 0.1 percent, of the omicron variant. Officially, just over [5,200 people](#) have died of covid in China since the beginning of the pandemic.

Projections made by international experts put the real death toll closer to 5,000 people each day, with [several models predicting](#) more than 1 million covid deaths in China in 2023. The elderly population, among whom booster rates are especially low, is expected to suffer the most.

“The good side is that they are dealing with the omicron, not the original or delta variants,” said Mai He, a professor of pathology and immunology at Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis and the [lead author of a 2020 report](#) that used crematorium estimates to suggest underreporting of deaths in Wuhan, where the [coronavirus](#) first emerged. “The bad thing is, due to zero covid, most Chinese, their immune system has not been primed.”

China’s National Health Commission and its Foreign Ministry did not respond to requests for comment.

But in a [sharply worded commentary published Monday](#), the People’s Daily, the mouthpiece of the ruling Chinese Communist Party, defended the approach. “China follows a science-based approach in preventing and controlling COVID-19 and has been constantly fine-tuning its response measures in light of the evolving situation,” the commentary said.

For the Chinese Communist Party and leader Xi Jinping, however, evidence of exponentially higher-than-reported deaths poses a direct challenge to their narrative that, under their wise leadership, the Chinese approach to covid is superior to Western ones.

“China was so proud of its covid control measures until spring of 2021,” said [Yanzhong Huang](#), senior fellow for global health at the Council on Foreign Relations. “But look at it now. Everything has fallen

apart and its pandemic response model has become a laughingstock. This is going to affect not just the leaders but the legitimacy of the regime itself.”

Beijing

In November, new outbreaks emerged in some of China’s biggest cities, such as Beijing and Guangzhou, despite the government’s zero-covid policy, prompting a new tightening of measures. In response, there were [mass protests](#) of a size and scale not seen in decades.

After authorities dramatically lifted most restrictions in early December, infections ripped through the population, which has little natural immunity to the virus; most residents have been immunized with Chinese-made vaccines that are less effective against the omicron variant.

Beijing was among the earliest to be hit, with [80 percent or more of the population](#) having contracted the virus by the end of December, according to estimates by Zeng Guang, former chief epidemiologist at the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention. [Videos showed](#) hospitals in the Chinese capital packed with sick patients, many of them elderly.

A funeral home in Tongzhou, on the outskirts of Beijing, appears to have built a new parking area around that time, according to imagery captured by Maxar on Dec 24.

Using additional imagery taken by [Planet Labs](#), The Post determined that the expansion occurred sometime on or after Dec. 22. Two days later, over 100 vehicles were parked at the funeral home.

Staff at the funeral home were working overtime, cremating as many as 150 bodies a day, up from 40, according to a [since-deleted report](#) published by the state-run Beijing Youth Daily. [Police were seen at the funeral home](#) overseeing a steady stream of arrivals on Dec. 21, according to Reuters. But mentions of the facility were conspicuously absent from major Chinese web platforms when The Post searched them in early January.

Kunming

Outside the Kunming Funeral Home in the southwestern province of Yunnan, the parking areas were unusually crowded on Jan. 5, compared with imagery taken a year earlier. Vehicles can be seen parked along streets near an entrance, where people are also visible.

On Dec. 28 and 29, an account on Douyin — the Chinese version of TikTok — posted photographs and a video showing crowded conditions at the facility. The Post could not confirm the exact time of filming, but the video included shots of heavy crowding taken both during the day and at night.

Another video, posted on Jan. 2, showed lines snaking through the same building. “This year’s epidemic. This many people are waiting in line through the night,” wrote the user who posted it.

The deceased are usually cremated within days in urban areas, said Huwy-min Lucia Liu, an anthropology professor at George Mason University. This means that people seeking services in large cities like Kunming were probably doing so for family members who had recently died, she said.

“People waiting outside the funeral parlor at night would not be there to attend a funeral as guests,” Liu said. “They might be bereaved families or funeral brokers there representing bereaved families who are waiting to get in first thing in the morning to make arrangements for memorial services and cremation. Normally, that would not require lining up, let alone doing so at night.”

Shanghai

The Post verified videos taken since late December showing crowds outside the Baoxing and Longhua funeral parlors, two large facilities in central Shanghai.

One video, taken at night and posted to Douyin in the early hours of Dec. 28 showed a long line outside Baoxing. The uploader commented that the line consisted of family members as well as “scalpers” holding spaces, who had waited for more than five hours. Police have publicly warned against scalping.

“I have never seen such a long line outside Baoxing,” said Liu of George Mason University, who has studied the funeral industry in the city. “Having spent 18 months in various Shanghai funeral parlors, this long line is definitely unusual,” she said.

For Shi, a 27-year-old Shanghai resident whose father died of covid just a month after turning 60, the process at the Baoxing Funeral Home was especially grueling. His father died at home on Dec. 21 but the funeral parlor told Shi that because of the number of people waiting, it would be another five days before arrangements could be made for his cremation. The family would have to keep the body at home in the meantime.

To make sure he got a slot for his father, Shi started queuing at 9 p.m. the night before. When he arrived there were already 50 people in line. Police were on-site to keep order. He waited through the night, finally getting a number for his father at 8 a.m. the next day; the cremation was conducted a few hours later at another site. No family members were allowed to attend. Shi was told the ashes would be available for collection in a month or two.

“For ordinary families like us, this is definitely a heavy blow,” Shi said. Although Shi’s father tested positive before he died, the cause of death was listed as “underlying disease.”

“Is this not a blatant lie?” he asked.

Nanjing

In Nanjing, a major city northwest of Shanghai, Maxar satellite imagery from Jan. 3 captured a line of white vehicles along a road inside the Nanjing Funeral Home, a sprawling complex built in 2013.

A [video](#) posted on Twitter on Dec. 23 showed vans stretching to a road south of the complex. The Post could not confirm the date the footage was recorded.

Similar scenes were recorded north of the city, at the Liuhe District Funeral Home. A resident named Jin, who gave only her surname because of security concerns, described waiting for almost a full day to deliver the body of her grandfather to the facility for cremation.

A video Jin posted and later deleted from Douyin showed a long line of vans and plumes of smoke filling the sky overhead. The Post verified that video, along with another Jin shared that showed the same types of vans waiting along Mayuxian Road, more than 1,000 feet from the facility.

Jin said she saw at least 40 vans outside the funeral home, as well as residents who had been apparently unable to secure a van transporting bodies on small utility trolleys. A receptionist at the funeral home said all the freezers for storing cadavers were full.

“Our driver told me that he has been doing this job for decades but he has never seen anything like this,” Jin, 29, said. “It’s really sad.”

Chengdu

At the Donglin Funeral Home in Chengdu in the southwestern province of Sichuan, satellite imagery taken by Maxar on Dec. 21 showed dozens of vehicles parked around the complex, including white vehicles resembling vans used to transport bodies. An image taken a year earlier, on Dec. 18, 2021, showed the funeral home practically empty of vehicles.

Facing overwhelming demand, Donglin has had to curtail normal operations, staff said.

“Due to the unusual circumstances, we are suspending all memorial services, but families can still bid farewell to the deceased prior to cremation,” a receptionist told The Post on Thursday.

When asked how long families had to say goodbye, she added: “Two minutes.”

A nationwide surge

In addition to Chengdu, Kunming, Nanjing and Beijing, The Post also found increased traffic at funeral homes in Tangshan, a city east of Beijing, and Huzhou, near Shanghai.

“As a general trend, we have seen increased vehicle activity and traffic at a number of funeral homes and crematoriums in Chinese cities during the past month when compared to similar time periods in past years,” Stephen Wood, senior director of Maxar News Bureau, said in an email.

The funeral homes captured by satellite imagery offer a snapshot of what is happening across the country.

People working at funeral homes in other parts of the country have provided further evidence of what is happening on the ground. The receptionist at the Jiangnan Funeral Home in Chongqing described how workers were split into three shifts so the home could operate 24 hours a day. “From when I started work to when I got off, the lobby area was totally full of people arranging cremations,” she said.

At Jingyunshan, a funeral parlor in Guiyang, the capital of the southwestern province of Guizhou, a receptionist said they handled up to 250 bodies a day during the last two weeks of December — more than twice the facility’s daily peak before covid restrictions were lifted. Storage space was full and incinerators were operating 24 hours a day.

There have also been numerous obituaries announcing the deaths of public figures whose passing was not reflected in the official count. They include a former diplomat who helped negotiate Hong Kong’s handover to China, whose wife said he had covid, and the designer of the 2008 Beijing Summer Olympics mascot, who died of a “severe cold.”

Pressed on the real death count, authorities have tried to assuage the public.

Liang Wannian, a top adviser on the government’s coronavirus response team, said at a news conference late last month that the authorities would only be able to investigate covid deaths after the current wave. Wu Zunyou, chief epidemiologist at the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention, added that the center has been analyzing excess mortality rates and would release the results later.

Those answers may not come soon enough for residents.

In Jinan, the capital of the eastern province of Shandong, Wang, 24, drove past the Jinan Funeral Home at 3 a.m. on Dec. 30 and saw almost 100 people waiting in line in the cold. He stopped to record the scene — some in the group were fighting after a person had attempted to cut in line. Wang, who gave only his surname for fear of retribution by authorities, posted the video on Douyin but later found that the authorities had censored it.

“It’s hard for me to understand why they want to shut our mouths,” he said.

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HEADLINE	01/09 Most of L.A. County in flash flood warning
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/09/us/california-storm-weather-forecast.html
GIST	CARPINTERIA, Calif. — As California reeled from another bout of extremely wet weather on Monday night, most of Los Angeles County was under a flash flood warning — an unusual twist for a dry, sunny place where the concern is typically a lack of water.

The [flash flood warning](#) for southwestern Los Angeles County was issued before 7 p.m. and would be in effect until midnight, the National Weather Service [said in an advisory](#). The warning affected more than 8 million of the more than 10 million residents in the county, the most populous in the United States.

The full extent of flooding in Los Angeles County was not immediately clear as of about 10:30 p.m. California's Central Coast, where officials had ordered evacuations on Monday in a coastal enclave of Santa Barbara County, still appeared to be the hardest hit area of the state for the day.

But as heavy rain pummeled the L.A. area, the Weather Service said that downtown Los Angeles, Malibu, Hollywood and Beverly Hills were among the places that would experience flash flooding. Early images showed cars [partially submerged by floods](#) near downtown. And more than an inch of rain [fell in a single hour](#) in a part of Los Angeles County that had once been damaged by wildfires.

The Federal Aviation Administration also issued a so-called [ground stop](#) for Los Angeles International Airport shortly after 8 p.m., a move that slowed the pace of takeoffs and landings for about an hour amid high winds, said Victoria Spilabotte, a spokeswoman for the airport.

"That usually happens at airports across the country, but we don't often have a ground stop, mostly because Los Angeles has pretty good weather year round," she added. "So this type of storm is not typical for us."

Earlier on Monday, the Weather Service said that it [expected "no significant letup"](#) to the waves of moisture — known as [atmospheric rivers](#) — that had been pummeling California for weeks. Heavy precipitation was expected across the entire state on Tuesday, and parts of Southern California could see up to seven inches of rain over the next few days, the agency said.

The flooding, and fears of danger, in Los Angeles on Monday night followed a frantic day in Santa Barbara County, where officials ordered thousands of residents to quickly evacuate the coastal enclave of Montecito amid fears of mudslides in an area where wildfires have made soils and vegetation less stable.

Up to a foot of rain was expected to soak Montecito's already drenched hillsides. And the evacuation orders were issued five years to the day that a deadly torrent of mud and boulders [rushed through neighborhoods in that mansion community](#), killing 23 people and turning it into a disaster area.

"We're in the midst of a series of significant and powerful storms," Sheriff Bill Brown of Santa Barbara County said in a briefing. "Currently, we're experiencing a storm that is causing many problems and has the potential to cause major problems across our county, especially in the burn scar areas."

Late Sunday, President Biden approved an [emergency declaration](#) for 17 counties in California, allowing for federal assistance from the Federal Emergency Management Agency and the Department of Homeland Security in relief and rescue efforts.

Elsewhere along the Central Coast, one person was [killed by floodwater](#) while trying to navigate a submerged road in San Luis Obispo County, north of Santa Barbara. A 5-year-old boy remained missing. Residents were evacuated from numerous communities because of flood risks as their streets turned into gushing streams.

At the Best Western Plus Carpinteria Inn, several miles southeast of Montecito, a steady stream of people clad in rain gear pulled up in SUVs packed with luggage and provisions. Some who had evacuated said they were surprised to be among those ordered to leave because their homes were not in burn scars, areas hit by wildfire that are made more susceptible to landslides.

In the 2018 storm that led to the devastating mudslide, officials had issued mandatory evacuation orders for about 7,000 residents in Montecito and voluntary ones for another 23,000, but many disregarded them because they had just returned home after being forced to leave during a wildfire.

Montecito is a popular haven for celebrities, including Prince Harry and his wife, Meghan, the Duchess of Sussex; Oprah Winfrey; and Ellen DeGeneres, who [posted a video on Twitter](#) of a raging creek behind her house that she said “never flows, ever.”

“We need to be nicer to Mother Nature because Mother Nature is not happy with us,” Ms. DeGeneres said.

Evacuation orders were also in place in neighboring Ventura County, including in the tiny community of La Conchita, the site of [a 2005 landslide](#) around the same time of year that killed 10 people.

In Santa Cruz County, about 70 miles south of San Francisco, more than 30,000 residents were evacuated as creeks and rivers topped their banks, threatened homes and washed away at least one bridge. Mudslides blocked two highways in the Santa Cruz Mountains that connect the region to the San Francisco Bay Area.

The flooding in the county besieged an area already reeling from some of the [heaviest damage](#) from recent storms. Just last week, the confluence of a storm surge, high tides and high surf collapsed piers and flooded hundreds of homes and businesses.

The storm’s impacts continued farther south along the state’s Central Coast, with evacuation orders along rivers in Watsonville and Monterey County.

Numerous roads were closed amid flash-flood warnings in San Luis Obispo County, where the 5-year-old boy remained missing after he and his mother escaped from a car that was starting to be swept away by floodwaters. His mother, who had been driving him to school around 8 a.m., was rescued by nearby residents, but the boy was carried away by waters coursing down a rising creek, said Tony Cipolla, public information officer with the San Luis Obispo County Sheriff’s Office.

Divers with the agency’s underwater search and rescue team scoured the nearby waters for hours, but had to call off the search around 3 p.m. when the rising waters and rapid current made it too dangerous, he said.

Rivers and creeks in the area were gushing like they hadn’t in decades, said Scott Jalbert, the county’s emergency services manager. “They’re pretty monstrous,” he said.

California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo shut down for the day. The university reported that students, faculty and animals were being evacuated from agricultural facilities with a reservoir about to breach.

In the nearby town of Santa Margarita, Tamara Snow Nyren said that for all her preparations the night before — building a fort of sandbags all around her home — she was not ready for Monday’s flooding.

“My God, I look out the window to my alley, and I saw a river coming down my alley,” she said.

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HEADLINE	01/09 Ukraine assaults Russians in Bakhmut
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/09/world/europe/ukraine-bakhmut-strategy.html
GIST	<p>BAKHMUT, Ukraine — It was midmorning last Friday when the camera of a Ukrainian drone zoomed in on a Russian soldier moving furtively among trees on the edge of town. Another enemy assault was underway in the eastern city of Bakhmut.</p> <p>The drone pilot marked coordinates as he watched, then sent them by satellite link to artillery commanders.</p> <p>Within a few minutes, Ukrainian artillery units struck the houses where they had seen the Russians taking cover. Smoke from the hits could be seen rising silently on the drone operator’s screen.</p>

Later that day, however, an armored vehicle rumbled out of an eastern neighborhood carrying wounded Ukrainian soldiers toward a stabilization point in the city's west. Ukraine's army was taking its hits, too.

It's a grim stalemate that has taken on the rhythms of a heavyweight title bout, with each side going toe to toe in one of the longest-running battles of the war. That stands in contrast to Ukraine's strategy elsewhere along the front line, where it succeeded by avoiding direct confrontations, relying instead on nimble maneuvers, deception and Western-provided long-range weapons to force Russian retreats.

In an earlier phase of the war, Ukraine's leadership had been more equivocal about pitched battles like Bakhmut. President Volodymyr Zelensky, in a rare moment of public self-doubt, [mulled then](#) whether the deaths of about 100 Ukrainian soldiers per day in Sievierodonetsk and Lysychansk were worth the fight for two already ruined cities.

But this time, there has been no second-guessing. And new research suggests the lethal urban combat last summer was not as senseless as it might have seemed at the time.

An [analysis](#) by two leading military analysts published last month by the Foreign Policy Research Institute vindicated the attritional fighting. The pitched battle weakened the Russian Army enough for two Ukrainian counterattacks in the fall to succeed, wrote the analysts, Rob Lee and Michael Kofman. Those offensives, in the Kharkiv region in the north and Kherson in the south, delivered two of the most embarrassing defeats of the war to President Vladimir V. Putin of Russia.

"The amount of ammunition Russia expended and the casualties they took set up the Russian Army for failure," Mr. Lee said in an interview.

Whether Bakhmut winds up playing a similar role ahead of expected spring offensives by Ukraine depends on many variables, he said, including how many soldiers Russia can field after a mobilization this past fall.

Fierce fighting [continued to rage on Monday](#) along the front line that extends from Bakhmut northeast toward the city of Soledar, with the Russians claiming to have taken a nearby village and Ukraine saying that it had repelled Russian attempts to storm Soledar itself.

Ukraine's deputy defense minister, Hanna Maliar, said [in a post on Telegram](#) that after an unsuccessful attempt to capture Soledar and subsequent retreat, the enemy regrouped "and launched a powerful assault." Ukrainian forces were "bravely defending every inch," she wrote.

At the Pentagon on Monday, a senior U.S. military official described the combat in and around Bakhmut as "really severe and savage" with both sides slugging it out.

Bakhmut's strategic value is debatable, but it carries symbolic importance for both sides. For Russia, capturing it would be the most significant success in months. In Ukraine, the long battle and heavy losses have turned Bakhmut into a national symbol of defiance. Mr. Zelensky cited the city in a high-profile appearance before the U.S. Congress last month, and presented House Speaker Nancy Pelosi with a Ukrainian flag signed by soldiers fighting in Bakhmut.

(The imperative to "Hold Bakhmut," as Ukrainians say, nevertheless carries some risks, analysts warn, saying that it could cloud military judgment and potentially delay a retreat if one becomes necessary).

Viewed from the sky, on the monitor of a drone pilot, Bakhmut slides silently by in sepia hues of brown mud roads, gray rubble of homes and white smoke rising from fires. The stalemate has transformed a swath of ruins and mangled, muddy fields on the city's eastern rim into scenes reminiscent of World War I: Shell craters are ubiquitous, and the abandoned bodies of Russian soldiers lie about, with Ukrainian troops often complaining of the stink.

“It’s a place like Verdun in the First World War, where each side is trying to bleed out the other,” Lt. Gen. Frederick B. Hodges, the former American commanding general in Europe, said of the battle of Bakhmut, now in its sixth month.

A drone overflight of the wasteland on Thursday recorded a typical scene: two Russian bodies lying on the battlefield beside an artillery crater. “It looks like apocalypse,” Pvt. Oleksiy Kondakov, a Ukrainian soldier who rotated out of Bakhmut last month, said of the area.

Inside the city, few civilians remain, most on the less heavily damaged western bank of the small river that divides Bakhmut, the Bakhmutovka. The eastern neighborhoods are panoramas of collapsed and burned houses.

Soldiers settle into a familiar routine. Last Friday, a team of Ukrainians careened down a muddy street in a sport utility vehicle, wheeled into a courtyard and piled out, standing next to a wall with rifles ready, just as they do most days.

Inside the relative safety of a ruined building, one soldier set about unspooling cable for a satellite link. Another unpacked a drone. They exchanged pleasantries with another unit that happened to be using the same devastated building that day, sharing tea with them and ignoring the booms and rattle of gunfire outside.

In czarist times, the city was a trading hub in eastern Ukraine and a center of salt mining. The Soviet authorities renamed it Artyomovsk, after a Bolshevik who helped quash a short-lived Ukrainian independent republic in the early 1920s. Before Russia’s invasion, it was home to red brick merchant houses and universities, nestled between rolling, grassy hills in the eastern Donbas region.

Today, about 7,000 people remain of the city’s prewar population of about 100,000, according to Tetiana Scherbak, a director of a volunteer soup kitchen on the western bank, where a few dozen civilians huddled around a wood stove on Friday, warming their hands and charging phones from a generator.

In the central square, heedless of the explosions, on some days a drunken woman spirals and dances, arms out like a child mimicking the flight of an airplane. She is a character known to the locals who have remained.

“Everybody suffers” in her own way, said Svitlana Shpachenko, 54, a former accountant warming up at the soup kitchen.

The battle in Bakhmut has been fought in two phases: for the first 100 days or so the Russian regular army was involved, and from then on a private military contracting company, the Wagner Group, which has recruited prisoners into its ranks.

The second phase has been the bloodier one, as the Russians have assaulted the city using brigades made up of the convicts. The company’s owner, Yevgeny V. Prigozhin, who is a close associate of President Vladimir V. Putin and is seen as wanting a victory in Bakhmut to boost his political standing back in Russia, tested new tactics.

Many of these units were essentially throwaway soldiers; Ukrainian soldiers have called them human wave assaults.

“Essentially they take the brunt of whatever Ukrainian response there is,” said the senior American military official, speaking on condition of anonymity to discuss operational details. “Then you have better trained forces that move behind them to claim the ground that these individuals have walked over.”

Serhiy Hrabsky, a former Ukrainian colonel and commentator for the Ukrainian news media, called the fighting around Bakhmut “a completely different nature” of war. Ukraine persists in the city’s defense, he said, in part because “their losses are important for us.”

The attack on Friday was a case in point.

The Russians were moving forward from the forest into the town on foot, with no armored vehicles to be seen by the drone flying overhead. On the screen, the readings of altitude and range ticked up and down.

“Without eyes, we lose people,” said the drone pilot, who asked to be identified by his nickname, Navara, in keeping with Ukrainian military policy. “And we cannot lose people. We have fewer anyway.”

Navara asked not to reveal precise locations but said it could generally be said of the Russians moving into town that “the bastards are about 800 meters that way,” pointing a finger out the broken window of the building.

Not long afterward, Ukrainian artillery hit the Russians as they took cover in an area of deserted and mostly destroyed one- and two-story homes. In the streets of the neighborhood, a firefight was picking up, and the clatter of machine guns echoed about.

After a few flights, the drone team drove out by another road, avoiding the street fighting.

Private Andriy Pancheko, a member of the drone team, had been working as an electrician in Poland before the invasion but returned and volunteered in the army. Broadly, he said, Ukrainians were defending their country because “if we don’t fight, we won’t have freedom.”

The purpose of holding out specifically in the ruins of eastern Bakhmut was less clear, he admitted. “I don’t know, I just take orders,” he said. “They commanded me to be here. But why not? It’s our land.”

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HEADLINE	01/09 Investigations into Brazil riots
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/09/world/americas/brazil-protests-investigation.html
GIST	<p>Brazilian investigators, taking stock of the damage around the capital and questioning detained protesters, face several major questions as they piece together how rioters briefly seized the seats of Brazil’s government.</p> <p>The protesters, supporters of the far-right former president Jair Bolsonaro, had been camping out since he lost October’s election to Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva. Mr. Bolsonaro had asserted without any proof that Brazil’s election systems were rife with fraud, but he agreed to a transition of power to Mr. Lula after the election.</p> <p>The pro-Bolsonaro protesters claimed the election was stolen, though Brazil’s military and independent experts found no credible evidence of voter fraud.</p> <p>Now, investigators will focus in part on how the demonstration on Sunday was organized, and on how it transformed into a violent riot. In the days after Mr. Lula took office on Jan. 1, there were widespread calls on social media for a huge demonstration in the capital, Brasília.</p> <p>Those calls circulated among supporters of Mr. Bolsonaro mostly on two apps, WhatsApp and Telegram. Some messages urged people to organize attacks against critical infrastructure, such as oil refineries and roadblocks. On Telegram, some called for the storming of the Monumental Axis, the avenue that goes directly to major government buildings.</p> <p>According to an intelligence briefing by the military police of Brasília, at least 100 buses carrying 4,000 demonstrators arrived between Friday and Sunday. It was not immediately clear where the social media calls first originated, or how the caravans of buses were organized.</p>

Most of the people who arrived in recent days stayed in an encampment in the capital that supporters of Mr. Bolsonaro had maintained in front of the army's headquarters since the election in October.

It was also not clear why the rioters were able to breach government buildings — Congress, the Supreme Court and the presidential offices — so easily. State police officers had tried to repel them, but they were far outnumbered.

Videos showed protesters wandering and ransacking the halls of power. Federal officials later distributed images and videos that showed destroyed computers, art ripped from frames and firearm cases without their guns.

Eventually, the military retook control of the buildings, and the authorities began to make arrests. The authorities had arrested at least 200 people as of late Sunday, according to Brazil's justice minister, though Ibaneis Rocha, the governor of the district that includes Brasília, said that evening more than 400 people had been arrested.

At least 1,200 people were detained for questioning, a police spokesman said on Monday. Some could be charged with committing crimes against democratic institutions or with attempting to unseat a democratically elected government, he said.

Overnight, a Supreme Court judge suspended Mr. Rocha, a supporter of Mr. Bolsonaro's re-election campaign, for 90 days while investigations take place into security failures. Mr. Rocha on Sunday called the riots an act of terrorism, and said on Twitter that the hundreds of people arrested in the aftermath would "pay for the committed crimes."

Mr. Lula signed an emergency decree late Sunday that put federal authorities in charge of security in Brazil's capital, and the dismantling of protest camps has since proceeded peacefully. Brazil's Congress was called back from recess for an emergency session.

Mr. Bolsonaro, who appeared to be in Florida, criticized the protests on Sunday evening, saying on Twitter that peaceful demonstrations were part of democracy, but that "destruction and invasions of public buildings, like what occurred today," were not. He also repudiated Mr. Lula's comments that he bore some responsibility for the riots, saying those accusations were "without proof."

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HEADLINE	01/09 How did La Niña winter become so rainy?
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/09/us/california-la-nina-rain.html
GIST	<p>As rain has deluged our parched state since New Year's Eve, many Californians have found themselves asking a familiar question: Is this somehow because of El Niño?</p> <p>In the California imagination, the climate pattern known as El Niño has an almost mythological status as a harbinger of prolonged wet spells, while its counterpart, La Niña, is associated with drought. The past three years have been La Niña years.</p> <p>The continuing procession of storms this winter has drawn comparisons to the famed wet winter of 1997-98, when rain driven by El Niño drenched the Golden State. Californians are bracing for one of the season's most intense storms to date on Monday and Tuesday.</p> <p>But Daniel L. Swain, a climate scientist at the University of California, Los Angeles, said that El Niño hasn't taken over — yet.</p> <p>"As much as it walks and talks like El Niño, it ain't," he said of this winter's pattern. "We still have La Niña conditions, despite rumors of its demise."</p> <p>Even so, long-range forecasts suggest that California will transition into El Niño in the autumn.</p>

So how does this all work? How do we know if El Niño has taken over?

Swain explained, simplifying a bit, that El Niño is essentially one side of a pendulum swing and La Niña is the other. During El Niño, trade winds are weaker, and warm water in the Pacific sloshes toward the western coasts of North America and South America. During La Niña, stronger trade winds push warm water in the other direction, toward the coast of Asia. Ocean temperatures affect the weather.

This dynamic means that the effects of El Niño and La Niña vary in different parts of the world. In parts of the western Pacific, like Indonesia, for example, El Niño tends to produce drier conditions, rather than rain.

In California, the relationship between wet years and El Niño depends on the strength of the pattern, and to some degree on chance. In other words, an El Niño year loads the dice in favor of a wet year, but does not guarantee one.

The latest heavy storms and flooding remind Jan Null, a meteorologist and former lead forecaster for the National Weather Service, of the winter of 2016-17, which was also a La Niña year.

“Every El Niño is not wet, and every La Niña is not dry,” Null said.

Complex advanced predictive tools are showing that by next summer or fall, El Niño will probably be in place, and this time the pattern could be “a pretty strong one,” Swain said. That could bode well for California and the West’s water outlook.

“All of it is fascinating, and also humbling,” he said. “We’re literally predicting the future.”

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HEADLINE	01/09 Simulated Taiwan war: US beats China
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2023/jan/9/us-defeats-china-simulated-war-over-taiwan-costs-a/
GIST	<p>A sophisticated new study of a simulated war between China and the U.S. over Taiwan reveals Chinese forces would be defeated in the conflict but with a high cost in casualties and heavy losses of U.S. and allied large ships and aircraft, according to a think tank report made public Monday.</p> <p>The Center for Strategic and International Studies conducted 24 separate war game scenarios involving an amphibious assault by China across the 100-mile Taiwan Strait, setting off a war with Taiwan, the United States and Japan. U.S. military officials say Chinese strategists see a military “window” for action against Taipei in the next few years.</p> <p>“In most scenarios, the United States/Taiwan/Japan defeated a conventional amphibious invasion by China and maintained an autonomous Taiwan,” the report concludes. “However, this defense came at high cost.”</p> <p>The cost, even in the “optimistic scenarios,” according to the report: “The United States and Japan lose dozens of ships, hundreds of aircraft, and thousands of service members. Such losses would damage the U.S. global position for many years. While Taiwan’s military is unbroken, it is severely degraded and left to defend a damaged economy on an island without electricity and basic services.”</p> <p>“China also suffers heavily,” the report noted. “Its navy is in shambles, the core of its amphibious forces is broken, and tens of thousands of soldiers are prisoners of war.”</p> <p>With Chinese President Xi Jinping defining the retaking of Taiwan as a “core interest” of his government, the 165-page report states that a U.S.-Chinese conflict over Taiwan remains “the most dangerous potential flashpoint in bilateral relations.”</p>

Secretary of State Antony Blinken warned several months ago that China appears to be speeding up its timetable for action against Taiwan, which Beijing regards as a breakaway province despite the island having a separate government for more than 70 years. U.S. military commanders also have warned that a Chinese military operation against Taiwan could take place before the end of the decade.

Adm. Philip S. Davidson, who stepped down as head of the U.S. Indo-Pacific Command in April 2021, told Congress that a Chinese invasion of Taiwan was possible in the next six years.

The U.S. military frequently conducts simulated war games against China. The results of the exercises are kept secret to avoid alerting China to U.S. military weaknesses and vulnerabilities, but analysts and game organizers have said in the past that China is often victorious in the simulated conflicts.

The CSIS report said it conducted the war games and made the results public to enhance debate on the topic. CSIS simulators said they tried to cast a wider lens to describe the multinational conflict that is most likely to occur.

U.S. policy toward Taiwan is rooted in the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act, which calls for supporting a defense of Taipei but stops short of saying U.S. forces would intervene in a conflict.

Chinese forces since August have stepped up provocative military exercises around Taiwan, including missile firings that were part of a simulated practice for an island takeover campaign. Just over the weekend, a fleet of Chinese military jets again crossed into Taiwan's defensive airspace in the Taiwan Strait, the latest violation of the long-respected boundary line.

Military analysts say U.S. military forces remain focused on Army forces needed for the post-9/11 war on terrorism and not enough has been done to refocus the military toward deterring China in the Pacific theater.

To meet the challenge of China's increasingly aggressive military, the United States needs to transform forces to boost naval and air power.

Learning from history

The CSIS report said conflict scenarios were developed from historical data and operations research that modeled a Chinese invasion in 2026. Simulators gathered information from the Normandy invasion in World War II and amphibious warfare campaigns by U.S. Marines in Okinawa and the British-Argentine conflict over the Falkland Islands.

"The invasion always starts the same way: An opening bombardment destroys most of Taiwan's navy and air force in the first hours of hostilities," the report said. "Augmented by a powerful rocket force, the Chinese navy encircles Taiwan and interdicts any attempts to get ships and aircraft to the besieged island."

During the invasion, tens of thousands of Chinese troops cross the 100-mile-wide strait on military amphibious craft and civilian cargo ships. Air attacks are followed using airborne troops landing behind beachheads.

In the CSIS war games scenarios, the Chinese military attack "quickly founders," the report said. Intervention by U.S. submarines, bombers and fighter bombers, backed by forces from the Japan Self-Defense Forces, quickly cripple the Chinese amphibious force.

"China's strikes on Japanese bases and U.S. surface ships cannot change the result: Taiwan remains autonomous," the report said.

Even in the think tank's "base scenario," the losses on both sides would be extraordinary, with Japan and the U.S. losing nearly 450 combat aircraft and 40 ships. China would lose 155 combat aircraft and nearly 140 ships.

A key condition for success in repulsing the Chinese attack is that Taiwan's government and military must successfully resist and not surrender.

If Taiwan gives up before U.S. forces take part in the defense, the island would be lost to the Chinese, the report said.

Even if a Chinese attack is repulsed, the heavy losses of troops, ships and aircraft would damage American power for many years. Taiwan's military, while surviving, would be severely degraded and left to defend a damaged economy and lost electrical power and basic services.

China's navy would be severely weakened with tens of thousands of Chinese troops taken as prisoners of war.

"The challenges confronting China in an invasion are severe," said Matthew Cancian, a senior researcher at the Naval War College who helped organize the war games exercise.

China's amphibious military operations were found to be vulnerable to U.S. and allied attack, a key to preventing a Chinese takeover, Mr. Cancian said at a panel discussion coinciding with the release of the report.

Eric Heginbotham, a research scientist at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and a participant in the study, said U.S. casualties would be similar to those in World War II with around 10,000 casualties. U.S. bases on the U.S. island of Guam also would be hit by Chinese missiles and destroyed in the first hours of a war. In all but five of the war simulations, China attacked U.S. bases in Japan, Mr. Heginbotham said.

The study did not argue for or against defending Taiwan, but "the potential costs of such a defense need to be part of the debate," he said.

Conditions for success

The report identifies several conditions for success, including strengthening Taiwan's ground forces, which need better-combined arms training and equipment.

Also, there is no "Ukraine model" of indirect warfare where the U.S. and its allies supply the weapons and the Taiwanese do the bulk of the fighting. Supplying arms as is being done to Ukraine in its war with Russia will not work in Taiwan since China could isolate the island for weeks or even months.

"In peacetime, the United States and Taiwan must work together to provide Taiwan with the weapons it needs; in wartime, if the United States decides to defend Taiwan, U.S. forces must quickly engage in direct combat," the report said.

Another key to defeating a Chinese invasion will be the use of American military bases in Japan as the jumping-off point for combat operations. To that end, the report urges deepening diplomatic and military relations with Japan.

The government of Japanese Prime Minister Fumio Kishida, who visits President Biden in Washington on Friday, announced recently that it will adopt a defense strategy that includes the use of offensive Tomahawk cruise missile strikes.

Another essential requirement for defeating a Chinese attack on Taiwan will be the ability to strike Chinese navy ships rapidly through large-scale salvos from longer ranges outside Chinese defense

zones. To meet that requirement, the CSIS report urges increasing the arsenal of U.S. long-range anti-ship cruise missiles and bombers with long-range anti-ship missiles.

“Procuring such missiles and upgrading existing missiles with this anti-ship capability needs to be the top procurement priority,” the report said.

The war game simulations showed the United States would win but could end up suffering more in the long run than the Chinese who would be defeated.

Also, threats of high costs of a Taiwan conflict might undermine deterrence since China could attack based on the belief that the United States is unwilling to pay the cost of the war.

“The United States should therefore institute policies and programs to make winning less costly in the event of conflict,” the report said, including clarifying war plans, avoiding attacks on the Chinese mainland and preparing for an extended war despite high casualties.

The report projected that U.S. forces in three weeks would sustain about half the casualties that resulted from 20 years of war in Iraq and Afghanistan. About 6,800 U.S. troops were killed in those two wars, along with more than 59,000 wounded.

U.S. policy should seek to persuade Taiwan to shift its air and naval forces in the direction of asymmetric warfare capabilities – weapons and tactics that allow a weaker force to better confront China’s military superiority — and air bases in Japan and Guam should be hardened against Chinese missile attacks.

The Pentagon is building new Aegis missile defense on Guam in addition to Terminal High-Altitude Area Defense anti-missile systems already in place.

U.S. forces also should avoid overflying China during a future conflict as China’s integrated air defenses have been bolstered.

For weapons reforms, the U.S. military should transform forces with small, more survivable ships and better systems to deal with crippled ships and warships that will be sunk during combat. Submarine power also should be emphasized.

During the war simulations, “submarines were able to enter the Chinese defensive zone and wreak havoc with the Chinese fleet, but [the] numbers were inadequate,” the report said.

The U.S. military also needs to ramp up its hypersonic missile campaign, but with the projected high costs of the missiles there will not be enough to counter large numbers of Chinese and air and naval forces.

Bomber fleets should be given priority over fighter jets because the bombers armed with long-range missiles “presented the People’s Liberation Army with daunting challenges” during war games, the report said.

Instead of building expensive F-35s, the military should produce large numbers of less-expensive fighters to offset the expected losses of aircraft early in a conflict, the report said.

The report said the study and recommendation do not seek to imply that a Chinese attack on Taiwan is inevitable or probable. Instead of military options, the Chinese might conduct a non-military pressure campaign to achieve their goal of a Taiwan takeover, including diplomatic isolation, non-kinetic warfare and economic coercion. Beijing has long used economic and other incentives to entice the small number of states that still have diplomatic relations with Taiwan.

Use of military force by China also could involve a blockade rather than invasion.

	“However, the risk of invasion is real enough and potentially so destructive that analysis is worthwhile,” the report said.
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HEADLINE	01/09 US: possible Iran war crimes in Ukraine
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2023/jan/9/us-says-iran-may-be-contributing-to-war-crimes-in/
GIST	<p>MEXICO CITY — The Biden administration said Monday that Iran’s sale of lethal drones to Russia for use in its ongoing invasion of Ukraine means the country may be “contributing to widespread war crimes.”</p> <p>National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan leveled the charge against Iran on Monday as he spoke to reporters accompanying President Joe Biden on a trip to Mexico. While it did not signal a policy shift, the charge marked some of the sharpest U.S. rhetoric against Iran since it began providing weapons to Russia to support its nearly year-long war in Ukraine. It comes as the U.S. and European partners are looking to further ostracize both nations in the court of public opinion, as they face challenges with physically stopping the transfers of weapons on which Russia is increasingly reliant.</p> <p>Sullivan said Iran had chosen “to go down a road where their weapons are being used to kill civilians in Ukraine and to try to plunge cities into cold and darkness, which from our point of view, puts Iran in a place where it could potentially be contributing to widespread war crimes.”</p> <p>Sullivan pointed to European and U.S. sanctions on Iran put in place after the U.S. exposed Iran’s weapons sales to Russia last year as examples of how they are trying to “make these transactions more difficult.” But he acknowledged that “the way that they are actually carrying them out physically makes physical interdiction a challenge.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/09 Thousands of nurses strike NYC hospitals
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2023/jan/9/nurses-go-on-strike-at-two-big-new-york-city-hospi/
GIST	<p>NEW YORK (AP) — Nurses at two of New York City’s largest hospitals went on strike Monday in a dispute over pay and staffing levels after a weekend of negotiations that didn’t produce a deal for a new contract.</p> <p>The walkout involves as many as 3,500 nurses at Montefiore Medical Center in the Bronx and around 3,600 at Mount Sinai Hospital in Manhattan.</p> <p>The New York State Nurses Association, which represents the workers, said it was being forced into the drastic step because of chronic understaffing that leaves them caring for too many patients.</p> <p>“Nurses don’t want to strike. Bosses have pushed us to strike by refusing to seriously consider our proposals to address the desperate crisis of unsafe staffing that harms our patients,” the union said in a statement late Sunday.</p> <p>The hospitals have been getting ready for a walkout by transferring patients, diverting ambulances to other institutions, postponing nonemergency medical procedures and arranging to bring in temporary staffing.</p> <p>Gov. Kathy Hochul urged the union and the hospitals late Sunday to take their dispute to binding arbitration.</p> <p>Montefiore’s administration said in a statement that it was willing to let an arbitrator settle the contract “as a means to reaching an equitable outcome.”</p> <p>The union didn’t immediately accept the proposal. In a statement, it said Hochul, a Democrat, “should listen to the frontline COVID nurse heroes and respect our federally-protected labor and collective bargaining rights.”</p>

	<p>Montefiore and Mount Sinai are the last of a group of hospitals with contracts with the union that expired simultaneously. The Nurses Association had initially warned that it would strike at all of them at the same time - a potential calamity even in a city with as many hospitals as New York.</p> <p>But one-by-one, the other hospitals struck agreements with the union as the deadline approached.</p> <p>Nurses at NewYork-Presbyterian Hospital ratified a deal Saturday that will give them raises of 7%, 6%, and 5% over the next three years while also increasing staffing levels. That deal, which covers 4,000 nurses, has been seen as a template for the negotiations with other hospital systems.</p> <p>Nurses at two facilities in the Mount Sinai system also tentatively agreed to contracts Sunday. But negotiations continued at the system's flagship hospital on Manhattan's east side.</p> <p>Mount Sinai's administration said in a statement that the union's focus on staffing-to-patient ratios "ignores the progress we have made to attract and hire more new nurses, despite a global shortage of healthcare workers that is impacting hospitals across the country."</p> <p>If the nurses strike, patients are likely to see disruptions in care such as emergency room visits and childbirth.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/09 New Puget Sound airport site debate
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/state-commission-plans-recommend-new-airport-site-by-june-15/UO5EUYQBO5DLFESC4UFFQ5JFGE/
GIST	<p>OLYMPIA, Wash. — The debate over a new Puget Sound airport is about to get a lot more heated.</p> <p>On Monday, state lawmakers returned to work and are expected to get an earful in the months ahead about the idea of building a new airport about the size of Sea-Tac Airport.</p> <p>A state commission is due to recommend a single site for a new airport by June 15.</p> <p>Last year, commissioners narrowed the list to two sites in Pierce County and one in Thurston County.</p> <p>Separately, state transportation officials are studying a fourth site near Enumclaw.</p> <p>Among neighbors of the sites, opposition appears unanimous.</p> <p>"Those are beautiful rural areas that should not be destroyed by a mega airport," Dawn Sonntag of Stop the Thurston Airport told KIRO 7 last fall.</p> <p>So far, the only local government officials advocating for a major airport expansion are in Yakima.</p> <p>Some lawmakers say the selection process that excluded King County and existing military bases doesn't make sense.</p> <p>"We need to start over," said State Sen. John Braun (R-Minority Leader). "If it's going to take us 10, 20, 30 years to build this out, we need to make sure we get the first two years right."</p> <p>In a presentation to legislators on Monday, members of the commission offered a ballpark cost figure of a two-runway, 3,100-acre airport at \$13.8 billion in 2023 pricing, which could be nearly \$25 billion in 2043.</p> <p>Advocates of a new airport point to the limited space available to expand Seattle-Tacoma International Airport as a reason why a separate airport is necessary.</p>

	<p>Prior to the pandemic, SEA was regularly setting new records for passenger volumes.</p> <p>The airport has a footprint of 2,500 acres.</p> <p>By comparison, San Francisco International Airport and John F. Kennedy International Airport in New York each have footprints of roughly 4,900 acres.</p> <p>The limited footprint at Sea-Tac affects de-icing operations because there's not much room to do the work. Last month, Alaska Airlines proactively canceled flights with snow in the forecast.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/09 Classified files found at old Biden center
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/biden-politics-united-states-government-812ef44a5333f6d93423a67a683fa024
GIST	<p>WASHINGTON (AP) — The Justice Department is reviewing a batch of potentially classified documents found in the Washington office space of President Joe Biden's former institute, the White House said Monday.</p> <p>Special counsel to the president Richard Sauber said "a small number of documents with classified markings" were discovered as Biden's personal attorneys were clearing out the offices of the Penn Biden Center, where the president kept an office after he left the vice presidency in 2017 until shortly before he launched his 2020 presidential campaign in 2019. The documents were found on Nov. 2, 2022, in a "locked closet" in the office, Sauber said.</p> <p>Sauber said the attorneys immediately alerted the White House Counsel's office, who notified the National Archives and Records Administration — which took custody of the documents the next day.</p> <p>"Since that discovery, the President's personal attorneys have cooperated with the Archives and the Department of Justice in a process to ensure that any Obama-Biden Administration records are appropriately in the possession of the Archives," Sauber said.</p> <p>A person who is familiar with the matter but not authorized to discuss it publicly said Attorney General Merrick Garland asked U.S. Attorney for the Northern District of Illinois John Lausch to review the matter after the Archives referred the issue to the department. Lausch is one of the few U.S. attorneys to be held over from former President Donald Trump's administration.</p> <p>Irrespective of the Justice Department review, the revelation that Biden potentially mishandled classified or presidential records could prove to be a political headache for the president, who called Trump's decision to keep hundreds of such records at his private club in Florida "irresponsible."</p> <p>Trump weighed in Monday on his social media site, asking, "When is the FBI going to raid the many homes of Joe Biden, perhaps even the White House?"</p> <p>The revelation comes as Republicans have taken control of the House of Representatives and are promising to launch widespread investigations of Biden's administration.</p> <p>It also may complicate the Justice Department's consideration on whether to bring charges against Trump, who has launched a repeat bid for the White House in 2024 and has repeatedly claimed that the department's inquiry of his own conduct amounted to "corruption."</p> <p>The National Archives did not immediately respond to a request for comment Monday. Spokespeople for Garland and Lausch declined to comment.</p> <p>Rep. James Comer, the new GOP chairman of the House Oversight Committee, said Monday that the revelation raised questions about the Justice Department's handling of the Trump probe.</p>

“Is the White House going to be raided tonight? Are they going to raid the Bidens?” he asked reporters. “This is further concern that there’s a two-tier justice system within the DOJ with how they treat Republicans versus Democrats, certainly how they treat the former president versus the current president.”

His Democratic counterpart, Rep. Jamie Raskin, said Biden’s attorneys “appear to have taken immediate and proper action.”

“I have confidence that the Attorney General took the appropriate steps to ensure the careful review of the circumstances surrounding the possession and discovery of these documents and make an impartial decision about any further action that may be needed,” he added.

Rep. Jim Jordan, R-Ohio, chair of the powerful House Judiciary Committee, said Monday that the American public deserved to know earlier about the revelation of classified documents.

“They knew about this a week before the election, maybe the American people should have known that,” Jordan told reporters. “They certainly knew about the the raid on Mar-a-Lago 91 days before this election, but nice if on November 2, the country would have known that there were classified documents at the Biden Center.”

Jordan is among House Republicans pushing for the creation of a “select subcommittee on the Weaponization of the Federal government” within the Judiciary Committee.

Votes on creating that committee are expected as soon as this week, setting up a showdown between Republicans and the prosecutors leading various federal investigations, including the ones into Trump.

It wasn’t immediately clear why the White House didn’t disclose the discovery of the documents or the DOJ review sooner. CBS was first to report Monday on the discovery of the potentially classified documents.

The Justice Department for months has been investigating the retention of roughly 300 documents that were marked as classified and were recovered from the Trump’s Florida estate. In that instance, prosecutors say, representatives of Trump resisted requests to give back the full stash of classified documents and failed to fully comply with a subpoena that sought their return.

FBI agents in August served a search warrant at the Mar-a-Lago property, removing 15 boxes of records.

That investigation is being led by special counsel Jack Smith. Prosecutors have interviewed an array of Trump associates and have been using a grand jury to hear evidence.

It is not clear when a decision when will be made on whether Trump, or anyone else, should be charged.

The think tank, formally known as the Penn Biden Center for Diplomacy and Global Engagement, is affiliated with the University of Pennsylvania and continues to operate independently of the Biden administration.

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HEADLINE	01/09 Mass attack, riot on Brazil capital
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/09/world/americas/brazil-riots-bolsonaro-conspiracy-theories.html
GIST	<p>For the past 10 weeks, supporters of the ousted far-right President Jair Bolsonaro had camped outside Brazilian Army headquarters, demanding that the military overturn October’s presidential election. And for the past 10 weeks, the protesters faced little resistance from the government.</p> <p>Then, on Sunday, many of the camp’s inhabitants left their tents in Brasília, the nation’s capital, drove a few miles away and, joining hundreds of other protesters, stormed Congress, the Supreme Court and the presidential offices.</p>

By Monday morning, the authorities were sweeping through the encampment. They dismantled tents, tore down banners and detained 1,200 of the protesters, ferrying them away in buses for questioning.

Why an encampment demanding a military coup was allowed to expand for over 70 days was part of a larger set of questions that officials were grappling with on Monday, among them: Why were protests allowed to get so close to Brazil's halls of power? And why had security forces been so outnumbered, allowing throngs of protesters to easily surge into official government buildings?

Brazil's justice minister, Flávio Dino, said various security agencies had met on Friday to plan for possible violence in the planned protests on Sunday. But, he said, the security strategy hatched in that meeting, including keeping protesters away from the main government buildings, was at least partly abandoned on Sunday and there were far fewer law enforcement officers than had been anticipated.

"The police contingent was not what had been agreed upon," he said, adding that it was unclear why plans had changed.

Some in the federal government blamed the governor of Brasília, Ibaneis Rocha, and his deputies, suggesting that they had been either negligent or complicit in understaffing the security forces around the protests.

Late Sunday, Alexandre de Moraes, a Supreme Court justice, suspended Mr. Rocha from his job as governor for at least 90 days, saying that the upheaval "could only occur with the consent, and even effective participation, of the security and intelligence authorities."

Whatever security lapses may have occurred, Sunday's riot laid bare in shocking fashion the central challenge facing Brazil's democracy. Unlike other attempts to topple governments across Latin America's history, the attacks on Sunday were not ordered by a single strongman ruler or a military bent on seizing power, but rather were fueled by a more insidious, deeply rooted threat: mass delusion.

Millions of Brazilians appear to be convinced that October's presidential election was rigged against Mr. Bolsonaro, despite audits and analyses by experts finding nothing of the sort. Those beliefs are in part the product of years of conspiracy theories, [misleading statements and explicit falsehoods](#) spread by Mr. Bolsonaro and his allies claiming Brazil's fully electronic voting systems are rife with fraud.

Mr. Bolsonaro's supporters have been repeating the claims for months, and then built on them with new conspiracy theories passed along in group chats on WhatsApp and Telegram, many focused on the idea that the electronic voting machines' software was manipulated to steal the election. On Sunday, protesters stood on the roof of Congress with a banner that made a single demand: "We want the source code."

Walking out of the protest encampment on Monday morning, Orlando Pinheiro Farias, 40, said he had entered the presidential offices on Sunday with fellow protesters to find documents related to "the investigations into the source code, which legitimize that Jair Messias Bolsonaro is the president of Brazil."

He rattled off several government acronyms and secret investigations that he had read about on the internet, and then said that he had to go back to his tent to retrieve a Brazilian flag he had stolen from the building.

Delusions over the election extended to many protesters' explanations of what had happened in the riots. People filing out of the encampment on Monday morning, carrying rolled-up air mattresses, extension cords and stools, each had a clear message: Mr. Bolsonaro's supporters had not ransacked the buildings. Rather, they said, those causing the damage were radical leftists in disguise, bent on defaming their movement.

“Have you ever heard of the Trojan Horse?” said Nathanael S. Viera, 51, who had driven 900 miles to take part in the protests on Sunday. “The infiltrators went in and set everything up, and the damn press showed the Brazilian nation that we patriots are the hooligans.”

The scenes on Sunday of right-wing protesters draped in their national flag roaming through the halls of power were strikingly similar to those from the Jan. 6 storming of the United States Capitol, and so were the confused beliefs that drove protesters in both countries to invade federal buildings and film themselves doing so.

“Donald Trump was taken out with a rigged election, no question about it, and at the time he was taken out, I said, ‘President Bolsonaro is going to be taken down,’” said Wanderlei Silva, 59, a retired hotel worker standing outside the encampment on Monday.

Mr. Silva saw his own similarities between the riots on Sunday and those on Jan. 6, 2021. “The Democrats staged that and invaded the Capitol,” he said. “The same way they staged it here.”

Brazil has long seen itself in the mold of the United States: a sprawling, diverse country rich in natural resources, spread across a collection of independent states and governed by a strong central government. But its tumultuous political history never truly mimicked the American system, until the past several years.

“If there was no Trump, there would be no Bolsonaro in Brazil. And if there was no invasion of the Capitol, there wouldn’t have been the invasion we saw yesterday,” said Guga Chacra, a commentator for Brazil’s largest television network, who lives in New York and tracks politics in both countries. “Bolsonarismo tries to copy Trumpism, and Bolsonaro supporters in Brazil try to copy what Trump supporters do in the United States.”

Even a description of Brazil’s 2022 presidential election reads like a summary of the 2020 American one: a far-right populist incumbent with a penchant for insults and off-the-cuff tweets against a septuagenarian challenger on the left running on his proven political track record and a promise to unite a divided nation.

But the election’s aftermath was different.

While former President Donald J. Trump fought to overturn the results and urged his supporters to march on the U.S. Capitol on Jan. 6, Mr. Bolsonaro had effectively given up and decamped for Florida by the time his voters were forcing their way into the offices he once occupied.

Mr. Bolsonaro spent part of Monday in the hospital in Florida, dealing with abdominal pains stemming from a stabbing he suffered in 2018, his wife said on social media. Mr. Bolsonaro is planning to stay in Florida for the next several weeks or months, hoping investigations in Brazil into his activity as president will cool off, according to a friend.

Ned Price, the State Department spokesman, would not comment specifically on Mr. Bolsonaro’s visa status, citing privacy laws. But he said that any person who came to the United States under a diplomatic visa and who “is no longer engaged in official business on behalf of their government” was expected either to depart the country or request a different type of visa within 30 days.

“If an individual has no basis on which to be in the United States, an individual is subject to removal,” Mr. Price said.

In a recorded address in the final days of his presidency, Mr. Bolsonaro said that he had tried and failed to use the law to overturn the 2022 election, and suggested that his supporters should now move on. “We live in a democracy or we don’t,” he said. “No one wants an adventure.” On Sunday, he posted a message on Twitter, criticizing the violence.

But his years of rhetoric against Brazil’s democratic institutions — and his political strategy of instilling fear of the left in his supporters — had already left an indelible mark.

Interviews with protesters in recent weeks appeared to show that Mr. Bolsonaro's movement was moving beyond him. It is now driven by deeply held beliefs among many right-wing Brazilians that political elites rigged the vote to install as president Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, whom they regard as a communist who will turn Brazil into an authoritarian state like Venezuela.

Mr. Lula, the new president, is a leftist but is not a communist. And independent security experts said there was no evidence of irregularities in the 2022 vote. A separate analysis by Brazil's military found just one potential vulnerability in Brazil's fully digital voting system, which would require the coordination of multiple election officials to exploit, a scenario that security experts said was extremely unlikely.

Mr. Lula, who had campaigned on unifying the divided nation, is now faced with investigating and prosecuting many of his political opponents' supporters just a week into his presidency. The authorities said that roughly 1,500 protesters had been detained by Monday evening, and that they would be held until at least the investigation was finished.

On Monday, Mr. Lula spoke with President Biden, who conveyed "the unwavering support of the United States for Brazil's democracy and for the free will of the Brazilian people," White House officials said. Mr. Biden invited Mr. Lula to the White House in early February. (It took more than 18 months for him to meet with Mr. Bolsonaro at a summit in Los Angeles.)

In a televised speech on Monday night, Mr. Lula said that his government would prosecute anyone who had attacked Brazil's democracy on Sunday. "What they want is a coup, and they won't have one," he said. "They have to learn that democracy is the most complicated thing we do."

He and many of Brazil's top government officials then walked together from the presidential offices to the Supreme Court, crossing the same plaza that a day before was thronged with mobs calling for the overthrow of his government.

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HEADLINE	01/09 Seattle-area 'house rich-cash poor' ranking
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/data/seattle-area-percentage-of-house-rich-cash-poor-among-highest-in-u-s/
GIST	<p>There's a rule of thumb in real estate that homebuyers should spend roughly 2½ times their annual income on a home purchase. And like a lot of old real estate rules, that one's gone out the window for most of us — especially in places like Seattle where home values have skyrocketed.</p> <p>New survey data from the federal government shows that in the Seattle metro area, 4 out of 5 homeowners in 2021 said their home value was at least three times higher than their income — and for many of them, the ratio of home value to earnings was completely out of whack.</p> <p>The survey shows that for about 23% of Seattle-area homeowners — that's nearly 210,000 households — the home they own is worth at least 9 times their income.</p> <p>Seattle ranked sixth highest among the 25 metro areas in the survey for the ratio of home value to income. Four of the five metros with the highest median ratios were in California.</p> <p>This is sometimes called being "house rich, cash poor." We've seen this situation arise for some older, retired homeowners in the Seattle area who are living on a modest income while their home has appreciated tremendously in value. The term can also describe younger homeowners who are spending a very high percentage of their income on housing.</p> <p>The data comes from the new 2021 American Housing Survey, or AHS, which is the most comprehensive survey of housing data in the U.S. It is sponsored by the Department of Housing and Urban Development</p>

and conducted every other year by the U.S. Census Bureau. About 115,000 households are surveyed in 25 large metropolitan areas, including the 15 largest metropolitan areas. Seattle ranks 15th.

The Seattle metro area includes King, Pierce and Snohomish counties. There were an estimated 924,300 owner-occupied homes here in 2021.

The AHS data shows how sharply home values have risen in relation to income over the past decade in the Seattle area, even as incomes also increased greatly.

The AHS first included data on the ratio of home value to income in Seattle in 2013. At the time, the median ratio was 3.3 (in other words, home values were 3.3 times higher than incomes). In the new 2021 data, the median ratio for Seattle jumped to 4.9.

The median represents the midway point — so half of Seattle-area homeowners fell below a ratio of 4.9 for home value to income, and half were higher.

According to the AHS, the median ratio for the U.S. was 3.3 in 2021, a relatively modest increase from 3.0 in 2011.

While Silicon Valley has some of the highest incomes in the nation, the home prices are even more astronomical. The San Jose, California, metro area ranked No. 1, with a median ratio of 7.1. San Francisco (7.0) and Los Angeles (6.9) rounded out the Top 3.

Miami tied with Riverside, California, for fourth, both with a median ratio of 5.1.

There are still some places where home prices are more in line with what people earn.

Rochester, New York, was at the other end of the spectrum from San Jose — the median ratio of home values to income was 2.2. Most of the other areas with lower median ratios were in the fast-growing Sunbelt, including Birmingham, Alabama; Oklahoma City; and three Texas metros: Dallas, San Antonio and Houston.

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HEADLINE	01/09 Top-10 most profitable side hustles in 2023
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/business/these-are-the-top-10-most-profitable-side-hustles-in-2023/
GIST	<p><i>Bloomberg</i> - With pay raises set to disappoint and almost 40% of Americans resolving to save more in 2023, some are looking for new ways to generate extra income with a side hustle.</p> <p>Even as the U.S. job market remains strong, so does inflation, leading some to seek more money. While Labor Department data shows that wages rose 4.6% in December compared with a year earlier, that still lags inflation, which rose 7.1% in November from last year. Labor force participation ticked up in December, and the unemployment rate dropped to 3.5%, a five-decade low.</p> <p>“Given rising interest rates, inflation and other rising costs, people are more inclined to sign up for a side gig to cover the increasing cost of living,” said Sinem Buber, lead economist at ZipRecruiter. Side hustles also become more common in strong labor markets — like the one we’re in now — when opportunities are plentiful, Buber said. Lining up a second part-time job may also provide a cushion in case layoffs spill over from Big Tech into the rest of the economy.</p> <p>ZipRecruiter analyzed listings to identify jobs that can be done part-time with few or no starting requirements and ranked them by average hourly wages. Some popular side hustles like blogging or content creation didn’t make the list because they’re typically freelance and not listed on job sites.</p> <p>These are the 10 most profitable side gigs, according to ZipRecruiter:</p>

1. Family assistant

Coming in at number one is “family assistant,” which usually involves some combination of cooking, cleaning, child care, running errands, coordinating schedules and handling other household administrative tasks. Though many family assistants live with their employers and work full-time, part-time positions are available.

2. Craftsman

Craftsmen include specialists like carpenters, metal workers and glass blowers. Certificate programs, trade schools and community college offer training.

3. Sales specialist

Sales specialists work in a range of industries from tech to real estate to insurance. A sales representative reaches out to potential customers and manages those relationships.

4. Quality assurance reviewer

Quality assurance reviewers monitor, inspect and test products to ensure the company’s standards are upheld. QA reviewers can work in a wide range of sectors like food safety, pharmaceuticals, manufacturing and software.

5. Care coordinator

Care coordinators oversee and monitor patient care, usually in hospitals or long-term patient care facilities. The job involves coordinating schedules, working with patients and their families and organizing documentation and medical records.

6. Event representative

Event representatives organize special events for clients and help promote, set up and run the campaign. For example, event representatives could staff trade shows or festivals, talking to potential customers and marketing products or services.

7. Driver

Many types of companies need commercial drivers, including construction, health care and retail.

8. Customer service

Customer service representatives resolve complaints and help clients with technical issues over the phone or via email.

9. Nursing aide

Nursing assistants support health care staff by administering medication and providing basic care in hospitals, rehabilitation centers, nursing homes and assisted-living facilities.

10. Lead generator

Commonly known as telemarketers, lead generators reach out to prospective clients by phone, email and social media, answering questions about services and scheduling appointments.

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HEADLINE	01/09 Lawmakers convene in-person in Olympia
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/politics/lawmakers-convene-in-olympia-for-first-day-of-2023-legislature/
GIST	<p>OLYMPIA — State lawmakers kicked off the 2023 session on Monday, starting a 105-day marathon of bill-passing and budget-writing in their first fully in-person gathering since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic three years ago.</p> <p>The return of lawmakers seated side-by-side in chambers, with galleries loaded with family members and other observers looking on, stood in marked contrast to the mostly empty Capitol of the past two sessions.</p>

“It’s wonderful to be back in person,” said state Sen. Jamie Pedersen, D-Seattle. “I’ve described the last couple years to some people as all of the tedium and none of the joy.”

The state House and Senate officially convened shortly after noon for opening ceremonies, swearing in new members and electing leaders. Few wore masks, in another sign of an effort to return to pre-pandemic routines.

After her colleagues reelected her to lead the chamber, House Speaker Laurie Jenkins, D-Tacoma, walked up the aisle to the dais, exchanging hugs and handshakes with lawmakers of both parties.

“The last time I delivered remarks to a packed House, with actual visitors in the galleries, was on the opening day of the 2020 session, my first as speaker of the House,” Jenkins said. “At that time, none of us knew within weeks — in fact I researched it — within seven days of us kicking off our legislative session, would we be faced with a global pandemic that completely changed how we work, how we socialize and how we live our lives.”

She called the remote sessions “a historic first and, hopefully, last.”

Jenkins’ uneventful reelection Monday contrasted with the prolonged spectacle in “the other Washington,” where last week U.S. Speaker of the House Kevin McCarthy struggled to win the post, enduring 15 rounds of voting and days of stalemate.

Washington House Republican Leader J.T. Wilcox, R-Yelm, urged cooperation between lawmakers in a speech on the floor, describing the past two years of remote lawmaking as a struggle.

“I don’t think there’s any enterprise in life that is more about being human than politics,” he said. “And a legislature is the place where human contact is the most important.”

Over the next few months, state legislators will debate the two-year state budget, and plan to address some of the most significant issues facing Washington, including the housing shortage, gun laws and statutes around drug possession.

While in-person meetings are back, Washingtonians from all over the state can still testify without a trip to Olympia, as [the Legislature is continuing to allow remote testimony on bills](#).

Democrats hold the reins of power, with solid majorities in the state House and Senate, as well as every statewide elected office.

Gov. Jay Inslee, with an ambitious agenda of his own, including a [\\$4 billion housing construction proposal](#) aimed at easing the homelessness crisis, will address lawmakers on Tuesday in his annual State of the State address.

After opening the session Monday afternoon, lawmakers began meeting in committees, where legislation is developed and members of the public can weigh in.

Bills under consideration this week include a proposal to prohibit employers from requiring applicants to be screened for cannabis use and a proposal to set up relief centers for people experiencing a mental health crisis. Legislators also are considering a tax break for wineries and a bill restricting solitary confinement in state prisons.

Majority Democrats are fast-tracking plans to repeal “advisory votes” on tax increases approved by the Legislature. The nonbinding votes have been an annual feature on Washington ballots since passage of a 2007 initiative by anti-tax activist Tim Eyman.

	<p>But bills scheduled for hearings this week in the state House and state Senate would eliminate the advisory votes, “making ballots more meaningful.” The Senate version, SB 5082, is already scheduled for a potential committee vote on Friday.</p> <p>Lawmakers will also hear testimony on Inslee’s 2023-25 operating budget proposal on Tuesday in the Senate Ways and Means Committee and on Wednesday in the House Appropriations Committee.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/09 Superintendent: WA schools ‘accelerating’
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/education-lab/why-the-states-education-leader-says-wa-schools-are-accelerating/
GIST	<p>Graduation rates are holding steady, enrollments are picking up and school districts are on track to spend their federal pandemic relief funds, the state’s top education official said Monday.</p> <p>“We took a pause during the pandemic a bit. But we’re accelerating again,” said State Superintendent Chris Reykdal, who whipped through a wide range of policy proposals in a news conference on the first day of the 2023 legislative session.</p> <p>He urged legislators to focus on student mental health, citing rising youth suicide cases and a 2021 state survey which found that nearly two-thirds of middle schoolers and nearly half of high schoolers reported feeling sad or hopeless for at least two weeks of the year. His agenda also supports removing a statewide cap on special education funding, providing free school lunch for students and expanding a library program that gives free books to kids ages five and younger.</p> <p>This year’s agenda is consistent with what the state Education Department has supported — and not supported — in previous years. Reykdal, a former Democratic state lawmaker, is serving his second four-year term as state superintendent; he does not have the power to vote on laws.</p> <p>His presentation included some new statistics and projections compiled by his office.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • School enrollments ticked up again slightly this past fall, but the total head count is still down 4% from the fall of 2019. This year the total public school population stands at 1,095,122, about 46,000 students fewer than at the start of the pandemic. Reykdal said he does not anticipate a “rapid recovery” to this number, since many families found alternatives that they’re sticking with, such as home schooling. He asked lawmakers to help offset the funding loss associated with this shift, a request he has made in prior years. • Four-year graduation rates are up 2 percentage points, to 82%, compared with 80% in 2019. (In Seattle Public Schools, graduation rates increased by 6 percentage points in that same time period.) This is likely related to a push from districts and the state to make sure pandemic hardships didn’t prohibit students from graduating. Among the adjustments: a state program that waived credits for qualifying students. Rates are also up slightly for most students of color, and for foster and migrant students. White and Asian students lost a tiny amount of ground. Reykdal said his office would look into this trend, though it is likely not statistically significant. • Salaries have made up much of school districts’ spending on pandemic relief from the federal government, and classroom teachers have gotten the lion’s share of that money. Using those one-time funds, districts paid for nearly 2,400 new classroom teachers, followed by other employees such as paraeducators, librarians, emotional support staff and classified staff. This spending may have been used to preserve positions that may have otherwise been cut. He said districts were on track to spend the majority of remaining funds this school year, responding to concerns about a slow spend of relief dollars here and in other states. And, in a statement that seemed geared toward a request for more transparency in how the dollars are spent, he said his office was working within the requirements of the law, which is vague on requiring detailed accounts of spending.
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HEADLINE	01/09 Thousands lose power amid windy weather
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SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/thousands-without-power-in-puget-sound-area-amid-windy-weather/
GIST	<p>Several thousand Puget Sound Energy customers were without power Monday evening, down from more than 20,000 earlier in the day, as strong winds hit the region.</p> <p>Windy conditions are to blame for the widespread outages, which numbered just over 5,600 at 6:30 p.m. Melanie Coon, Puget Sound Energy spokesperson, said recent rainfall has saturated the soil, making it easier for winds to topple trees onto power lines.</p> <p>Hardest-hit areas include parts of King, Pierce and Thurston counties, she said. Crews have been working all day to assess damage and restore power.</p> <p>“We know outages are frustrating and disruptive and we are working around the clock to respond — with safety as our top priority,” Coon said in a statement.</p> <p>The outages continued after a wind advisory expired for the Seattle, Everett, Tacoma and Bellevue areas, as well as the north and central coasts.</p> <p>Wind gusts were expected to be strongest in the Cascades, reaching 45 mph.</p> <p>About 1,700 Seattle City Light customers also remained without power around 6:30 p.m. Most outages were reported in South Seattle.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/09 Lawmakers use ‘privilege’ to deny records
SOURCE	https://www.thenewstribune.com/news/politics-government/article270864472.html
GIST	<p>Washington state lawmakers may be invoking legislative privilege more often than leadership claimed last week during a pre-legislative press conference.</p> <p>Leading state lawmakers were given the opportunity Thursday to respond to claims that they have been using legislative privilege to deny access to public records.</p> <p>Some denied the use of the exemption altogether, while others, such as Senate Minority Leader John Braun, R-Centralia, and Speaker of the House Laurie Jenkins, D-Tacoma, gave their interpretation of the laws some legislators are now using to shield themselves from public disclosure of certain records.</p> <p>Since their comments, however, various organizations and individuals who have made public records requests have come forward to show instances where the exemption has been used by state lawmakers.</p> <p>On Wednesday, McClatchy first reported about how legislative privilege is being invoked by legislators to deny release of public records and how the Washington Coalition for Open Government (WashCOG) believes the self-given exemption is the latest in the Legislature’s attempts to conceal public records.</p> <p>On Thursday, media outlets at the legislative press conference were questioning leadership in both the House and Senate about those claims.</p> <p>Lawmakers were first asked whether they believe in the concept of invoking legislative privilege. Each of the four leaders was given the opportunity to speak.</p> <p>“It’s never once occurred to me that there must be some reason I could find that I shouldn’t turn this over if it is responsive to the request,” said House Minority Leader J.T. Wilcox, R-Yelm, who spoke first.</p> <p>Braun told reporters that he believes legislative privilege is “a thing” that has been around “for a hundred years or more.”</p>

The basis of Braun's interpretation lies in the Washington State Constitution.

That provision says that "no member of the legislature shall be liable in any civil action or criminal prosecution whatever, for words spoken in debate," However, that constitutional right does not speak specifically to public records, such as emails and texts, held by legislators.

Braun also noted that he believes legislative privilege should be used "infrequently" and claimed that he does not personally "use it at all." He added that he can count on one hand the number of times it has been used in the Senate Republican Caucus. The constitution, he said, does provide "some rights" and there is a fine line for how it should be used.

Senate Majority Leader Andy Billig, D-Spokane, told reporters that he agreed with Braun, and would leave it up to attorneys "to give the legal justification" for its use. Specifically, Billig said he believes in more transparency regarding the embattled Washington State Redistricting Commission and thinks legislative privilege shouldn't be used on that issue "particularly."

But he did not say if he believed in using the justification for other public records.

In fact, public records that were previously withheld under the claim of legislative privilege from Billig's office were released to requestor Jamie Nixon, the former communications director for the Redistricting Commission, on Wednesday after McClatchy initially published the first report.

While Billig's office did release public records pertaining to the Redistricting Commission that were previously withheld to Nixon, other communications from Billig's office are still being withheld from him under the guise of legislative privilege.

Nixon received an email from the Senate public records department that day that said they had received questions from the media regarding the first denial of records sent to him so they again pulled up his request.

"Upon doing so we discovered that the review process was incomplete. We often pull documents into a file that may need to be redacted for things like attorney client privilege or legislative privilege and then we return to those for further review and potential redaction," they said. "It appears that in this case we failed to do the final review at the time, and Senator Billig had not indicated that he intended to claim legislative privilege on the documents that were inadvertently withheld."

Jenkins said she also believes legislative privilege is grounded in the constitution and that it is used "rarely."

She said that individual legislators can assert legislative privilege, but that other legislators on the same communication chain can choose not to, so that record will still then become a public record.

Jenkins said legislative privilege exists for deliberation of the Legislature. She also told reporters she didn't think she had used it "at all."

But public records show that Jenkins' office has in fact invoked legislative privilege multiple times in requests filed by Nixon. Nixon was seeking information pertaining to the failure of a legislative staff unionization bill in 2022. He said he simply wanted to know why the legislation was never brought to the floor, and why a watered-down version of the bill was instead passed. The records he got in return were either heavily redacted or exempted altogether.

As legislators were being questioned a second time about their interpretation of legislative privilege during the Thursday's press conference, a fire alarm went off, ending the opportunity for all the lawmakers to respond.

Since Thursday, others have come forward to say they have received public records denials citing privilege.

Jason Mercier, government reform director for the Washington Policy Center, forwarded several emails to McClatchy where he was denied records using the legislative privilege exemption in regards to public records he sought about the capital gains tax. Mercier told McClatchy that he doesn't remember seeing legislative privilege used as an exemption before the past year.

In a press release from WashCOG sent out Jan. 4, the agency noted that "the Legislature rolled out its new disclosure policy quietly, not with a public announcement but with a series of records denials that is growing longer." Another group, WA Asians for Equality, posted screenshots on Twitter Saturday of 34 instances where legislative privilege had been invoked in a public records request seeking information from House Democrat Cindy Ryu about a Chinese American History Month bill that failed.

McClatchy sought clarification for the legislative privilege exemption from both the House and Senate public records offices before the initial article was published. Only the Senate public records office responded to a request for an explanation. Randi Stratton, public records officer for the Washington State Senate, told McClatchy that "legislative privilege is a constitutional protection against judicially compelled disclosure of internal legislative records" that stems from the Washington State Constitution Speech and Debate Clause.

"It protects the internal deliberative processes of the Legislature by allowing legislators the freedom to discuss and explore policy options and protects legislators from interference by the executive and judicial branches," Stratton said.

"Records are exempt from mandatory disclosure under the PRA if another statute creates a disclosure exception. Based on the Supreme Court's decision in Freedom Foundation v. Gregoire, and its recognition of a qualified executive communications privilege for gubernatorial deliberations, legislative privilege operates as an exception to the PRA's disclosure obligations."

Freedom Foundation v. Gregoire was a 2013 ruling by the Washington state Supreme Court that said governors of the state "could assert executive privilege to justify withholding documents that would otherwise be disclosable under the Public Records Act," according to the American Civil Liberties Union.

The law applies only to the executive branch, however.

Only one lawmaker so far has pledged not to use legislative privilege. Rep. Gerry Pollet, D-Seattle, posted a Facebook status about the issue Sunday and said he would never claim legislative privilege for records.

"I remain the only legislator who publishes their calendar so constituents and reporters know who I meet with, without having to file public records requests," said Pollet, who serves on the WashCOG board. "Sadly, you should expect that some legislators will claim privilege for who they meet with."

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WA legislators withhold public records as 'privilege': <https://www.theolympian.com/news/politics-government/article270743362.html>

HEADLINE	01/09 Calls flood 988 mental health, suicide line
SOURCE	https://www.seattlepi.com/news/article/Callers-keep-flooding-988-mental-health-suicide-17706686.php
GIST	<p>HYATTSVILLE, Md. (AP) — When Jamieson Brill answers a crisis call from a Spanish speaker on the newly launched national 988 mental health helpline, he rarely mentions the word suicide, or "suicidio"</p> <p>Brill, whose family hails from Puerto Rico, knows that just discussing the term in some Spanish-speaking cultures is so frowned upon that many callers are too scared to even admit that they're calling for themselves.</p>

“However strong stigma around mental health concerns is in English-speaking cultures, in Spanish-speaking cultures it is triple that,” said Brill, who helps people navigate mental health crises from a tiny brick building tucked away in Hyattsville, Maryland.

Brill works in one of more than 200 call centers fanned out around the country tasked with answering an uptick in calls day and night from people considering suicide or experiencing a mental health emergency.

With bipartisan congressional support and just under \$1 billion in federal funds, the 988 mental health helpline has quickly expanded its reach in the six months since it launched — raking in over 2 million calls, texts and chat messages.

The number of centers answering calls in Spanish grew from three to seven last year. A pilot line dedicated to LGBTQ youth started taking calls in September. And plans are underway to keep the momentum going, with the federal government adding Spanish language chat and text options later this year and aiming to expand those services to a 24/7 operation for the LGBTQ line.

When the around-the-clock phone launched last summer, it built on the existing network that staffed the old national lifeline, 1-800-273-8255. The new 988 number is designed to be as easy to remember as 911.

It couldn’t have come at a more needed time: Depression rates in U.S. adults, overdose deaths and suicide rates have been on the rise.

“The call volume is, in some instances, well beyond what we anticipated,” said Miriam Delphin-Rittmon, assistant secretary for mental health and substance use in the Department of Health and Human Services. “It does let us know that people are struggling, people are having a hard time. Where I feel heartened that people are getting connected to services and supports, as oppose to struggling on their own.”

The 988 helpline registered 154,585 more calls, texts and chat messages during November 2022 compared to the old national lifeline in November 2021, according to the latest data available.

Texting has been particularly popular, with the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration noting a 1,227% increase in texts to the line during that same time.

The Veterans Crisis Line — callers can press “1” after texting or calling 988 to reach it — has fielded 450,000 calls, texts and chat messages, according to the Department of Veterans Affairs. By the end of the year, the line had handled a nearly 10% increase compared to 2021.

Calls show no signs of slowing into this year, with counselors answering 3,869 calls on New Year's Eve and the first day of 2023 — a 30 percent increase compared to the previous holiday. The Spanish language line saw an increase of 3,800 calls year over year from November 2021 to November 2022.

Meanwhile, some states are considering unveiling their own lines dedicated to certain communities.

In November, Washington became the first state to launch a mental health crisis line dedicated to American Indian and Alaska Native people. Callers in Washington can reach the line by calling 988 then pressing “4” to be greeted by one of the 13 counselors — all Indigenous people — who staff the phones.

Having fellow American Indians answer those calls is crucial, because those familiar with the culture can immediately decode some terms that others cannot, said Rochelle Williams, the tribal operations manager for Volunteers of America Western Washington, which oversees the call center. For example, she said, when a caller says that a relative is “bothering me,” that sends up an immediate red flag: The person is likely signaling that they’re the victim of a sexual assault.

“Who has a better understanding of native people than native people?” Williams said. “We don’t trust in a lot of government programs. Knowing you’re talking to another Indigenous person is really important.”

	<p>Williams wants to add chat and text options next. She hopes Washington's 988 line for Native Americans becomes a model for others. She's already given presentations in New Mexico, Oklahoma, Montana and in Canada, which is set to launch its own national 988 this year.</p> <p>States are expected to receive more money to fund the line from the \$1.7 trillion end-of-the year spending package, which set aside another half-billion dollars for the project.</p> <p>Still, long-term funding for the 988 helpline is in jeopardy in some states, which have yet to figure out a permanent funding plan for it. While the federal government has poured millions of dollars into the project, states are expected to take over the operation and funding of the 988 line — just as they do with 911 emergency call services.</p> <p>So far, fewer than 20 states have passed legislation to permanently fund their 988 line, according to the National Alliance on Mental Health Illness.</p> <p>In Ohio, for example, advocates are pushing for the state legislature to sign off on a 50-cent fee that would be tacked onto cellphone bills, raising roughly \$50 million to \$55 million every year to operate the line, said Tony Coder of the Ohio Suicide Prevention Foundation.</p> <p>"Quite frankly, lives depend on it," Coder said. "The need for 988 services is more crucial than ever, simply because of the aftermath and the mental health issues from COVID."</p>
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HEADLINE	01/09 Train derails in south Seattle
SOURCE	https://www.king5.com/article/news/local/seattle/train-derails-seattle/281-db166067-255e-4d05-a873-6a73a5ea7871
GIST	<p>SEATTLE — A train has derailed on South Spokane Street, blocking the road in both directions and knocking down power lines, according to the Seattle Fire Department.</p> <p>Crews responded to the train derailment near Colorado Avenue South and South Spokane Street after 10 p.m. Monday night, according to Seattle Fire.</p> <p>As the train derailed, it collided with a power station, causing downed electrical wires. Seattle City Light is working to remove the downed wires. No injuries were reported.</p> <p>Seattle Fire turned the scene over to the Seattle Police Department.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/10 Inundated California faces more rain
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/california-storms-more-rain-deadly/
GIST	<p>The latest in a relentless string of storms slammed California on Monday, swamping roads, battering coastlines with high surf, turning rivers into gushing flood zones and forcing the evacuation of thousands in towns with histories of deadly mudslides. The storms are being blamed for at least 14 deaths.</p> <p>The National Weather Service said rain was expected to continue through Tuesday after dumping up to 14 inches at higher elevations in central and Southern California. After a brief respite, another storm was expected to barrel into the state in a few days, adding to the misery and further saturating areas already at risk of flooding and debris flows.</p> <p>The storms left behind chaotic roads, threatened coastal and riverside towns and left tens of thousands without power. The weather service issued a flood watch through Tuesday for the entire San Francisco Bay Area, along with the Sacramento Valley and Monterey Bay. Areas hit by wildfires in recent years faced the possibility of mud and debris sliding off burned hillsides that have yet to fully recover their protective layer of vegetation.</p>

"Additional heavy rains on Tuesday will exacerbate ongoing flooding and continue the risk of flash flooding and mudslides, especially across recent burn scar regions," the weather service said.

Forecasters also warned that southwestern California could see 60-mph wind gusts at the peak of the storm, while some areas could receive rainfall of a half-inch per hour.

Not only that, but the weather service warned of a "relentless parade of atmospheric rivers" - long plumes of moisture stretching out into the Pacific that can drop staggering amounts of rain and snow.

The death toll from the relentless string of storms that began last week climbed from 12 to 14 on Monday when two people including a homeless person were killed by falling trees, state officials said.

[Despite storm-related death on American River Parkway, homeless still won't budge](#) CBS Sacramento reports that unhoused people living at the site still don't want to leave.

California state highway authorities said late Monday night that parts of U.S. and state highways were closed because of flooding, mud or rockslides, heavy snow or car spinouts and truck crashes. The closures included northbound lanes of U.S. 101, a key coastal route, and sections of U.S. 6 and State Route 168.

Drama unfolded throughout the state.

Evacuation orders were issued in Santa Cruz County for about 32,000 residents living near rain-swollen rivers and creeks. The San Lorenzo River was declared at flood stage and drone footage showed numerous homes sitting in muddy brown water, the top halves of autos peeking out.

A 5-year-old boy vanished in floodwaters Monday on the central coast. The boy's mother was driving a truck when it became stranded in floodwaters near Paso Robles. Bystanders managed to pull her free but the boy was swept out of the truck and carried away, probably into a river, said Tom Swanson, assistant chief of the Cal Fire/San Luis Obispo County Fire Department.

A roughly seven-hour search for the missing boy turned up only his shoe before it was suspended because water levels got too dangerous for divers, officials said. The boy has not been declared dead, said spokesperson Tony Cipolla of the San Luis Obispo County Sheriff's Office. He told CBS News officials will re-evaluate the weather conditions to see when they can resume the search.

Also in San Luis Obispo County, the sheriff's office confirmed to CBS News that a driver was killed in floodwaters in Avila Beach on Monday.

About 130 miles to the south, about 10,000 people were ordered to evacuate in Santa Barbara County.

The National Guard was on standby in Wilton due to flooding concerns, [CBS Sacramento reports](#).

The entire seaside community of Montecito - home to Prince Harry, Oprah Winfrey and other celebrities - was ordered to flee on the fifth anniversary of a [mudslide that killed 23 people and destroyed more than 100 homes](#) in the coastal enclave.

County officials ordered 20 homes evacuated in the area of Orcutt after flooding and a sinkhole damaged up to 15 homes.

Jamie McLeod's property was under the Montecito evacuation order, but she said there was no way for her to "get off the mountain" with a rushing creek on one side and a mudslide on the other. The 60-year-old owner of the Santa Barbara Bird Sanctuary said one of her employees came to make a weekly food delivery and also became stuck.

McLeod said she feels fortunate because her home sits on high ground and the power is still on. But she tires of the frequent evacuation orders since the massive wildfire followed by the deadly landslide five years ago.

"It is not easy to relocate," McLeod said. "I totally love it, except in catastrophe."

Ellen DeGeneres shared an Instagram video of herself standing in front of a raging creek near the Montecito home where she lives with her wife, actor Portia de Rossi. She said in the post that they were told to shelter in place because they are on high ground.

"This is crazy," the talk show host, wearing a hoodie and raincoat, says in the video.

Some miles down the coast another town, La Conchita in Ventura County, was ordered evacuated. A mudslide killed 10 people there in 2005.

In Ventura County, the Ventura River reached its highest level on record at more than 25 feet.

The storm also washed 3 feet of mud and rock onto State Highway 126, stranding a long line cars and big-rig trucks. Crews worked into the night to pull them free.

In Los Angeles, a sinkhole swallowed two cars in the Chatsworth area on Monday night, [CBS Los Angeles reported](#). Two people escaped by themselves and firefighters rescued two others who had minor injuries, authorities said.

A mudslide sent up to five feet of mud downhill onto neighborhood streets in Studio City, [the L.A. Fire Department said](#).

Tens of thousands of homes and businesses were without power, including some 17,000 late Monday night in the Sacramento area. The number of customers without service was down from more than 350,000 a day earlier after 60-mph gusts knocked majestic trees into power lines, the Sacramento Municipal Utility District said.

President Biden issued an emergency declaration Monday to support storm response and relief efforts in more than a dozen counties.

Much of California remains in severe to extreme drought, though the storms have helped fill depleted reservoirs.

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HEADLINE	01/10 Russians fear starvation: food, ammo
SOURCE	https://www.thedailybeast.com/russians-fear-theyll-soon-be-starving-like-north-koreans?ref=home
GIST	<p>Russia rang in the new year with gaudy excess, patriotic fervor and echoes of a Soviet past. In studios filled with visiting servicemen, brought in from the front lines to film the New Year's extravaganza, hosts and performers toasted victory and mocked the West for the side effects of Russian sanctions. Comedian Yevgeny Petrosyan cheered for the troops, assuring them that the entire country was behind them. He taunted Ukraine and its Western allies: "Like it or not, Russia is enlarging!"</p> <p>Noisy bravado couldn't hide the fact that no one was drinking from the champagne glasses seemingly filled with sparkling water, or the blank stares on the faces of the visiting troops. One of the hosts, sports commentator Dmitry Guberniev, compared life to a biathlon—a grueling cross-country ski race with rifle shooting—and surmised: "If you're having a hard time, then the finish line is near and victory is close!"</p> <p>Holiday cheer notwithstanding, even Russian propagandists realize that hard times are only starting and attempts to summon a ghost of the Soviet past are directly related to a starkly different way of life that awaits the average Russian. On Wednesday, host of <i>Solovyov Live</i> Sergey Mardan struggled to contain his</p>

feelings about “the grinning and glee on the federal channels,” which continued even after the news of a [HIMARS strike that killed dozens of Russian troops in Makiivka](#). Mardan raged: “What happened in Makiivka is a tragedy! A real tragedy! There didn’t have to be a phone call from the top for them to figure out that TV programming should be changed to something that is more fitting. Instead of vulgar anecdotes, put on any old Soviet movie.”

The Soviet grooming that is being implemented by many Russian propagandists is meant to condition the people to the rapid decline in the standards of living to which many of them have become accustomed. The expectations are so dire, Mardan posed a startling question to his economic expert, Denis Raksha: “What are our chances? Do we even have them or not? Will we have to live like South Korea in the 1950s-1960s? Will we end up having to eat fire ants?”

Raksha explained that if Russia intends to drastically rebuild its economy in order to be self-sustaining everyday life will become quite difficult, even if Russians won’t have to resort to eating ants. He added: “Currently, the industrialization reminiscent of that of the 19th century or the 1920s-1930s is practically impossible. In that case, we’d have to live not like South Koreans, but like North Koreans.”

Another kind of hunger is also concerning Russian experts: a looming lack of ammunition. On Jan. 2, Victor Murakhovsky, editor-in-chief of the *Arsenal of the Fatherland* magazine, [raised an alarm on his Telegram channel](#), where he wrote: “In 1914, miscalculations of the General Staff as to the rate of accumulation of shells (900 shots) led to an acute shortage of shells for the army in the field. Urgent measures were required to save the army from a complete shell starvation. The military industry was not ready to solve this problem... the “ammo hunger” was fully eliminated only in 1916.”

Murakhovsky went on to explain his calculations for the same problem that is raising its head now: “In the early 1990s, the Russian army inherited from the Soviet army about 15 million tons of missiles and ammunition... As of January 1, 2013, the Armed Forces of the Russian Federation had 3.7 million tons of ammunition, of which 1.1 million tons are unusable. This means that 2.6 million tons of ammunition are usable. In 2020, almost 300 thousand pieces of ammunition were repaired and more than 20 thousand shells for multiple launch rocket systems were collected. The realistic need for ammunition is MILLIONS of pieces per year.”

During his program, Mardan described the predictions of the upcoming ammunition shortages as “apocalyptic writings” and pondered out loud whether Russian industry would be able to solve this problem. His guest, military expert Vladislav Shurygin, cautiously replied: “I read that post. It should be acknowledged that it was written by one of our best military professionals... but his calculations didn’t include the rate at which the ammo is currently being produced.” He argued that imposing strict usage norms on the battlefield was the way to keep the issue under control. Meanwhile, Russia is reportedly continuing to court other pariah states to source weapons and ammo to replenish its dwindling stocks.

The simple solution of abandoning Russia’s failing invasion of Ukraine never seems to occur to the pro-Kremlin propagandists. Mardan raged: “The enemy has to be destroyed down to the root! It has to be exterminated! Russian history of the last 1,000 years shows that the deed has to be brought to its final conclusion... If Stalin had deported [the people of] Western Ukraine—to me, it’s still a mystery why he didn’t do it—perhaps none of this would be happening.”

To sweeten the pot, the host rejoiced over millions of Ukrainian refugees who ended up in Russia, while Moscow struggles to alleviate a severe demographic crisis: “Look at how much the Motherland is spending to solve the demographic problem... We got these people [Ukrainians] for free, for nothing—approximately five million of them! Five million souls!”

Concluding the program, Mardan grimly noted: “To everyone who says that Russia should get up off its knees—myself included—my friends, I’m afraid that our former way of life is a thing of the past... It’s practically unavoidable... perhaps we’ll be reflecting upon the past year as our last fat year. On the other hand, a great victory is ahead of us!”

HEADLINE	01/09 Traffic deaths slip, pedestrian deaths rise
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/wireStory/elevated-us-traffic-deaths-slipped-1st-9-months-96314780
GIST	<p>DETROIT -- The number of traffic deaths on U.S. roadways fell slightly during the first nine months of 2022, but pedestrian and cyclist deaths continued to rise.</p> <p>The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration estimates that 31,785 people were killed in crashes from January through September last year, down 0.2% from the same period of 2021.</p> <p>The agency also estimates that fatalities dropped slightly in the third quarter of the year, the second straight quarterly decline after seven quarters of year-over-year increases.</p> <p>Agency Acting Administrator Ann Carlson said in a prepared statement Monday that there's still more work to do to address a crisis on the nation's roads. She urged people to drive safely and watch out for vulnerable road users such as pedestrians, cyclists and motorcyclists.</p> <p>The Governors Highway Safety Association, a group of state traffic safety officials, said the reduction in deaths is welcome, but it follows an unprecedented two-year surge in roadway deaths and dangerous driving.</p> <p>The number of deaths is down by only 65 from January through September.</p> <p>"Today's news is a small step forward for safer roads," the group said, blaming the spike in 2020 and 2021 on unsafe driver behavior, including speeding, impaired and distracted driving and lack of seat belt use.</p> <p>Fatalities began to rise two years ago when roads were largely empty due to stay-at-home orders in many states during the height of the COVID pandemic. With less traffic, speeds increased, as did reckless and impaired driving, leading to a record spike in deaths last year, authorities have said. Many people weren't wearing seat belts, the government said.</p> <p>NHTSA says its estimates typically are close to actual numbers. Final figures for 2022 won't be released until later.</p> <p>NHTSA said that Americans are driving more than during the height of the pandemic, with preliminary Federal Highway Administration data showing a 1.6% increase in vehicle miles traveled in the first nine months of last year. As a result, the estimated fatality rate for the period fell to 1.3 deaths per 100 million miles traveled, compared with 1.32 a year earlier.</p> <p>According separate estimates on the first half of last year, the number of cyclists killed in crashes rose 8% compared with a year earlier, while motorcyclist deaths rose 5% and pedestrian deaths were up 2%.</p> <p>Fatalities on rural interstates rose 12% during the first half of 2022, and crashes involving at least one large truck were up 10%, according to NHTSA estimates.</p> <p>But deaths fell 10% on urban collector and local roads, and dropped 10% among children younger than 16. Speeding-related crashes fell 2% during the period, and decreased 7% among people who weren't wearing seat belts.</p> <p>Nearly 43,000 people were killed on U.S. roads in 2021, the highest number in 16 years as Americans returned to the roads. The 10.5% jump over 2020 numbers was the largest percentage increase since NHTSA began its fatality data collection system in 1975.</p> <p>In an effort to reduce the deaths, the federal government is sending \$5 billion in aid to cities and localities to slow vehicles, carve out bike paths and nudge commuters to public transit.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/09 More schools implement mask mandates
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/Health/us-schools-institute-mask-mandates-covid-cases-rise/story?id=96314377
GIST	<p>More schools across the United States are putting mask mandates in place as COVID-19 cases continue to rise.</p> <p>Before winter break, districts in New Jersey and Pennsylvania announced they would temporarily be requiring masks among students and staff members amid a surge of respiratory illnesses.</p> <p>Now schools in Massachusetts and Michigan are following suit while Chicago schools are asking students to take rapid tests before classes start.</p> <p>Chelsea Public Schools in Boston announced in a letter to the community that the decision was due to Suffolk County designated as "high risk" for COVID-19 transmission as defined by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.</p> <p>"As a result of this designation, Chelsea Public Schools will implement a mask mandate, effective on Monday, January 9," Superintendent Dr. Almi G. Abeyta wrote in the letter. "Masks must be worn in school buildings at all times except when eating or drinking...Mask wearing will continue to remain mandatory for any person visiting our school health offices, and anyone returning to school from a five-day quarantine following a positive COVID-19 diagnosis."</p> <p>The letter did not state for how long the mandate would be in place.</p> <p>Meanwhile, Ann Arbor Public Schools in Michigan said it was instituting a two-week mandate starting Monday, Jan. 9, and ending Friday, Jan. 20.</p> <p>According to local affiliate WXYZ, the decision comes after a wave of respiratory illnesses led to at least five school closures in December alone.</p> <p>"The Ann Arbor Public Schools will require well-fitting masks to be worn by students, staff and visitors while indoors in AAPS schools, beginning on January 9th and during the first two weeks following the winter break," Superintendent Jeanice Kerr Swift wrote in a letter to families, students and staff. "Extra masks are available at all school buildings for use by students and staff."</p> <p>Additionally, Chicago Public Schools announced it is asking students and employees to perform a rapid at-home COVID-19 test before entering classrooms.</p> <p>"In order to keep our school communities safe, please test for COVID-19 before returning to school," the notice read. "If you test positive, please report the positive test using the COVID-19 Self-Reporting Form, and follow the guidance outlined on our safety page."</p> <p>Data from the CDC shows that COVID-19 cases are increasing even as cases of RSV and influenza are trending downward.</p> <p>Weekly cases have risen from 309,253 for the week of Nov. 30 to 470,699 for the week of Jan. 4, data shows.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/09 Germany, Lithuania support to Taiwan
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/german-lithuanian-lawmakers-show-support-taiwan-visit-96329937
GIST	<p>TAIPEI, Taiwan -- Lithuanian lawmakers on a visit to Taiwan took aim at China Tuesday, saying the world's second largest economy tried to use all sorts of measures to change Lithuania's decision to break diplomatic norms in warming up relations with the self-ruled island democracy.</p>

Taiwan is hosting German and Lithuanian lawmakers this week. China, which objects to diplomatic contacts between the island it claims as its own and other nations, held large-scale military exercises aimed at Taiwan over the weekend and into Monday.

The Lithuanian visit is focused on national security and defense as well as economic ties, lawmakers said.

“They tried to break our will, they tried to change our decision, they tried to harass investors and they tried to make economic sanctions ... but we survived,” Laurynas Kasciunas, head of the defense committee in Lithuania's parliament, said. “We are now resilient and stronger, and we can be a role model for other EU countries.”

The Lithuanian delegation is led by Kasciunas, along with the vice chair of the Taiwan friendship group in parliament, Dovile Sakaliene. The lawmakers drew parallels between the threat they face from Russia and the threat Taiwan faces from China, saying they both had authoritarian neighbors.

“We have very clear common goals, strengthening democracy globally ... and really helping everyone around us understand very clearly. There cannot be any ambivalence. You are either with the aggressor or you are with the victim,” Sakaliene said.

Lithuania angered China after it broke with diplomatic convention, allowing Taiwan to name its representative office in Vilnius — a de facto embassy — “Taiwan” instead of “Chinese Taipei,” a term used by other countries to avoid offending Beijing.

China expelled Lithuania's ambassador and downgraded diplomatic ties with the Baltic country. It also sought to punish the country economically by blocking imports from Lithuania into China. Lithuania then closed its embassy in Beijing and opened a trade office in Taiwan last November.

Taiwan and the mainland have been ruled separately since 1949 following a civil war.

Beijing refuses to have official relations with governments that recognize Taiwan as a sovereign country. It has persuaded all but about a dozen countries, most of them in Africa and Latin America, to switch recognition to the mainland.

Many governments, including the United States, have official diplomatic ties with Beijing while maintaining extensive commercial ties with Taiwan. Many maintain relations with the island's democratically elected government through trade offices that serve as informal embassies.

Last year, Taiwan started a \$1 billion credit program aimed at funding projects by Lithuanian and Taiwanese companies to counter economic pressure from China over an office that the island opened in the EU country.

The German delegates were more subdued in their language and did not offer any direct criticism of China. The delegation met with President Tsai Ing-wen Tuesday morning.

“We also believe that any change of the status quo of the Taiwan Strait can only be achieved by mutual agreement and any attempt to change the status quo by force or threatening to do it by force is unacceptable,” Johannes Vogel, vice chairman of the Free Democratic Party in Germany, said in opening remarks.

Vogel is heading the German delegation along with Marie-Agnes Strack-Zimmermann, who leads the German Parliament's Defense Committee.

HEADLINE	01/09 AI-powered 'robot' lawyer first court case
SOURCE	https://www.cbsnews.com/news/ai-powered-robot-lawyer-takes-its-first-court-case/
GIST	<p>A "robot" lawyer powered by artificial intelligence will be the first of its kind to help a defendant fight a traffic ticket in court next month.</p> <p>Joshua Browder, CEO of DoNotPay, said the company's AI-creation runs on a smartphone, listens to court arguments and formulates responses for the defendant. The AI lawyer tells the defendant what to say in real-time, through headphones.</p> <p>The artificial intelligence firm has already used AI-generated form letters and chatbots to help people secure refunds for in-flight Wifi that didn't work, as well as to lower bills and dispute parking tickets, among other issues, according to Browder. All told the company has relied on these AI templates to win more than 2 million customer service disputes and court cases on behalf of individuals against institutions and organizations, he added.</p> <p>It has raised \$27.7 million from tech-focused venture capital firms, including Andreessen Horowitz and Crew Capital.</p> <p>"In the past year, AI tech has really developed and allowed us to go back and forth in real time with corporations and governments," he told CBS MoneyWatch of recent advances. "We spoke live [with companies and customer service reps] to lower bills with companies; and what we're doing next month is try to use the tech in a courtroom for the first time."</p> <p>If the robot lawyer loses the case, DoNotPay will cover any fines, Browder said.</p> <p>Browder declined to disclose the name of the client and the court.</p> <p>Legal in some, but not most courtrooms</p> <p>Some courts allow defendants to wear hearing aids, some versions of which are bluetooth-enabled. That's how Browder determined that DoNotPay's technology can legally be used in this case.</p> <p>However, the tech isn't legal in most courtrooms. Some states require that all parties consent to be recorded, which rules out the possibility of a robot lawyer entering many courtrooms. Of the 300 cases DoNotPay considered for a trial of its robot lawyer, only two were feasible.</p> <p>"It's within the letter of the law, but I don't think anyone could ever imagine this would happen," Browder said. "It's not in the spirit of law, but we're trying to push things forward and a lot of people can't afford legal help. If these cases are successful, it will encourage more courts to change their rules."</p> <p>Lawyers "would not support this"</p> <p>The ultimate goal, according to Browder, is to democratize legal representation by making it free for those who can't afford it, in some cases eliminating the need for pricey attorneys.</p> <p>But given that the technology is illegal in many courtrooms, he doesn't expect to be able to commercialize the product any time soon.</p> <p>"This courtroom stuff is more advocacy," he said. "It's more to encourage the system to change," Browder explained.</p> <p>He is well aware of the challenge and hurdles on the horizon.</p> <p>When he tweeted about demoing DoNotPay's robot lawyer in court, lawyers threatened him and told him he'd be sent to jail, he told CBS MoneyWatch.</p>

"There are a lot of lawyers and bar associations that would not support this," Browder said.

Putting ChatGPT through law school

Browder wants to arm individuals with the same tools that large corporations can typically access, but are out of reach for those without deep resources.

"What we are trying to do is automate consumer rights," Browder said. "New technologies typically fall into the hands of big companies first, and our goal is put it in hands of the people first."

AI-powered chatbot ChatGPT has exploded in popularity recently for its ability to spit out coherent essays on wide-ranging topics in under one minute. The technology has drawn interest from investors, with the Wall Street Journal reporting that parent company OpenAI could soon attract investments valuing it at \$29 billion.

But Browder highlighted its shortcomings and in some cases, lack of sophistication.

"ChatGPT is very good at holding conversations, but it's terrible at knowing the law. We've had to retrain these AIs to know the law," Browder said. "AI is a high school student, and we're sending it to law school."

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HEADLINE	01/09 Russia election interference not significant
SOURCE	https://therecord.media/russian-interference-had-no-meaningful-effect-on-2016-election-result-study-finds/
GIST	<p>A new study has poured cold water on assumptions that Russian social media operations interfering in the 2016 U.S. presidential election had a significant impact on the final result.</p> <p>The research from the Center for Social Media and Politics at New York University, published on Monday in the journal Nature Communications, found “no evidence of a meaningful relationship between exposure to the Russian foreign influence campaign and changes in attitudes, polarization, or voting behavior” among those who had been exposed to it.</p> <p>It is the first study that measures the impact of this exposure through a longitudinal survey, which asks the same questions of the same group at different points in time to observe any changes. The survey was completed by YouGov in three waves between April 2016 and November 2016.</p> <p>Alongside the responses, the YouGov survey included the respondents’ Twitter data. This allowed the researchers to examine each person’s timeline for the period of the election campaign.</p> <p>The data revealed that 70% of the survey respondents had been exposed to posts which Twitter identified as part of a foreign influence operation, offering the researchers the opportunity to examine the impact of those operations on the respondents’ views.</p> <p>According to the study, these exposures were “concentrated among a small group of users, with only 1% of users accounting for 70% of all exposures.”</p> <p>Even then, the amount of material that originated from Russia was thoroughly overshadowed by the amount of exposure that the Twitter users had to “traditional news media and US political candidates.”</p> <p>Weighing against the effect of the interference, the small group of users who accounted for the majority of exposure to Russian foreign influence accounts “were those arguably least likely to need influencing” as they had already identified themselves as “highly partisan Republicans” and thus were “those least likely to vote for [Hillary] Clinton irrespective of exposure.”</p>

	<p>But most crucially, the researchers “did not detect any meaningful relationships between exposure to posts from Russian foreign influence accounts and changes in respondents’ attitudes on the issues, political polarization, or voting behavior,” according to the survey questions.</p> <p>Measuring this impact in general is a challenge, as the researchers note: “The large body of political science research that examines the effects of traditional election campaigns on voting behavior finds little evidence of anything but minimal effects even when messages are well-targeted and conducted in politically conducive environments.”</p> <p>Gavin Wilde, a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and a former director for Russia at the U.S. National Security Council, told The Record that the study did well to highlight the lack of evidence that the influence operations were effective.</p> <p>“There’s no real understanding of how humans internalize narratives (causal vs incidental) to baseline from,” said Wilde, who alongside Justin Sherman recently published a detailed examination of “the Kremlin’s so-called information war [...] through a domestic and regime security prism.”</p> <p>“I’m no seasoned researcher, but that’s where I’d say the onus is on the adherents to the idea that ‘influence operations via social media work and are a national security threat’ — to demonstrate that empirically even with available data,” he added via email.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/09 Pro-Ukraine hackers target Iran
SOURCE	https://therecord.media/irans-support-of-russia-draws-attention-of-pro-ukraine-hackers/
GIST	<p>Pro-Ukraine hacktivists were in a bad mood on New Year’s Day.</p> <p>The previous day, Ukrainian air defense forces shot down a total of 45 drones — many of them supplied by Iran — but missile explosions rocked Kyiv and other population centers as much of the world was ringing in the new year.</p> <p>In response, pro-Ukraine hacktivists claimed to launch distributed denial-of-service attacks on several Iranian websites, including the website of Iran’s supreme leader Ali Khamenei, and the National Iranian Oil Company (NIOC).</p> <p>“Iranians, it is not your war, step down and fuck off,” one group of pro-Ukrainian hackers and cybersecurity specialists wrote on Telegram.</p> <p>Usually, DDoS attacks carried out by hacktivists last minutes to hours and have no real impact on the targeted services. The attacks flood victim websites with fake traffic, making them temporarily unreachable. Neither NIOC nor Iran’s leadership have confirmed the alleged cyberattacks on their systems, though the country said it has stopped similar attacks in recent days.</p> <p>This doesn’t bother Ukrainian hacktivists — they said they will continue launching attacks until Iran stops supplying Russia with drones. “Each bombardment will be punished with a cyberattack on your critical infrastructure,” the pro-Ukraine hackers wrote. “We cooperate with the international community and know where your weaknesses are.”</p> <p>On Jan. 6, Iran said it stopped a wave of DDoS attacks on its central bank and domestic messaging apps — Rubika and Bale.</p> <p>“These days, the largest volume of foreign attacks is against banks and financial institutions, internet providers, and communications infrastructures, which have been repelled,” Amir Mohammadzadeh Lajevardi, head of Iran’s Infrastructure Communications Company, told state-controlled news agency IRNA.</p>

	<p>It is not yet clear who is behind these attacks and whether they are linked to the attacks on NIOC and Iran's government websites.</p> <p>Iran has become a popular target for hacktivists following anti-government protests sparked by the death in police custody of 22-year-old Mahsa Amini, who was arrested for "improperly" wearing her hijab.</p> <p>Anonymous and other hacking groups have claimed cyberattacks on Iranian government services and private companies that support the regime.</p> <p>Earlier in September, Anonymous took responsibility for cyberattacks on Iran's central bank and the Ministry of Culture. The hackers also claimed to have hacked other Iranian state agencies but didn't provide any evidence.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/09 San Francisco BART ransomware attack?
SOURCE	https://therecord.media/san-francisco-bart-investigating-ransomware-attack/
GIST	<p>San Francisco's Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) is investigating an alleged ransomware attack after the Vice Society ransomware gang claimed to have attacked the agency.</p> <p>BART – the fifth-busiest heavy rail rapid transit system in the United States – was listed on the group's leak site on Friday. Alicia Trost, chief communications officer for BART, told The Record that they are investigating the data that was stolen and posted by the group.</p> <p>"To be clear, no BART services or internal business systems have been impacted," she said. "As with other government agencies, we are taking all necessary precautions to respond."</p> <p>The rail industry has seen its fair share of cyberattacks in recent years. In April 2021, New York City's Metropolitan Transportation Authority – one of the largest transportation systems in the world – was hacked by a group based in China.</p> <p>While the attack did not cause any damage and no riders were put at risk, city officials raised alarms in a report because the attackers could have reached critical systems and may have left backdoors inside.</p> <p>The same month, the Santa Clarita Valley Transportation Authority was hit with a ransomware attack.</p> <p>In 2020, the Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority also experienced a ransomware attack.</p> <p>Just last week, one of the world's largest rail and locomotive companies announced a data breach that involved troves of employee information following an alleged ransomware attack last summer.</p> <p>Homeland Security Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas announced new cybersecurity regulations last year for U.S. railroad operators, requiring them to disclose any hacks, create cyberattack recovery programs and name a chief cyber official. Those regulations expired in December.</p> <p>The Vice Society ransomware gang has drawn international headlines with attacks on colleges and K-12 schools, including the second largest public school district in the U.S. and several in the United Kingdom.</p> <p>The FBI, Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) and other agencies noted in an alert in September that Vice Society has "disproportionately" attacked dozens of educational institutions over the last year and stepped up its level of attacks in the fall of 2022.</p> <p>But the group also "continues to focus on organizations where there are weaker security controls and a higher likelihood of compromise and ransom payout," according to a Microsoft report released in October.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/09 API flaws in 16 major car brands
SOURCE	https://thehackernews.com/2023/01/millions-of-vehicles-at-risk-api.html
GIST	<p>Multiple bugs affecting millions of vehicles from 16 different manufacturers could be abused to unlock, start, and track cars, plus impact the privacy of car owners.</p> <p>The security vulnerabilities were found in the automotive APIs powering Acura, BMW, Ferrari, Ford, Genesis, Honda, Hyundai, Infiniti, Jaguar, Kia, Land Rover, Mercedes-Benz, Nissan, Porsche, Rolls Royce, Toyota as well as in software from Reviver, SiriusXM, and Spireon.</p> <p>The flaws run a wide gamut, ranging from those that give access to internal company systems and user information to weaknesses that would allow an attacker to remotely send commands to achieve code execution.</p> <p>The research builds on earlier findings from late last year, when Yuga Labs researcher Sam Curry et al detailed security flaws in a connected vehicle service provided by SiriusXM that could potentially put cars at risk of remote attacks.</p> <p>The most serious of the issues, which concern Spireon's telematics solution, could have been exploited to gain full administrative access, enabling an adversary to issue arbitrary commands to about 15.5 million vehicles as well as update device firmware.</p> <p>"This would've allowed us to track and shut off starters for police, ambulances, and law enforcement vehicles for a number of different large cities and dispatch commands to those vehicles," the researchers said.</p> <p>Vulnerabilities identified in Mercedes-Benz could grant access to internal applications via an improperly configured single sign-on (SSO) authentication scheme, while others could permit user account takeover and disclosure of sensitive information.</p> <p>Other flaws make it possible to access or modify customer records, internal dealer portals, track vehicle GPS locations in real time, manage the license plate data for all Reviver customers, and even update vehicle status as "stolen."</p> <p>While all the security vulnerabilities have since been fixed by the respective manufacturers following responsible disclosure, the findings highlight the need for defense-in-depth strategy to contain threats and mitigate risk.</p> <p>"If an attacker were able to find vulnerabilities in the API endpoints that vehicle telematics systems used, they could honk the horn, flash the lights, remotely track, lock/unlock, and start/stop vehicles, completely remotely," the researchers noted.</p> <p>"The interconnectedness of our devices is making securing cars more challenging — as exemplified by cyberattacks on cars increasing by 225% in the last three years, with 84.5% of these attacks executed remotely," Sandeep Singh, senior manager of technical services at HackerOne, said in a statement, explaining the uptick in automotive hacks and the need for collaborating with the ethical hacking community.</p> <p>"As the technology of automobiles becomes more advanced, so does the complexity of their intelligent software systems," Singh further added. "Identifying the software supply chain vulnerabilities caused by 'smart' features requires deep knowledge of software and hardware systems and an understanding of the custom protocols that are specific to connected vehicles and automotive systems."</p>
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HEADLINE	01/09 Offensive cyberops role in armed conflict?
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SOURCE	https://www.scmagazine.com/feature/critical-infrastructure/the-russia-ukraine-war-is-causing-some-to-rethink-the-role-of-offensive-cyber-operations-in-armed-conflict
GIST	<p>For some, the horror of the Russian invasion of Ukraine was also meant to mark the dawn of a new era in modern warfare: one in which degrading your enemy’s capabilities through cyberspace would play an important — perhaps even decisive — role in determining success on the real-world battlefield.</p> <p>As militaries and societies grew ever more connected to and reliant on the internet to run, so too would the cyberspace domain grow in importance in combat, and nowhere was that supposed to be demonstrated more clearly than in Russia’s war, where their elite and well-resourced military hacking units could cut off Ukraine’s access to power, water and other essential resources, disrupt their communications, wipe out large swaths of private and public sector systems and data, and smooth the way for ground troops to dominate their Ukrainian counterparts.</p> <p>In reality, the impact of offensive cyber operations appears to have been far more muted.</p> <p>While the initial invasion did, in fact, come with a flurry of hacking campaigns against many of these targets as Russian troops crossed the border, the cadence of those campaigns have dropped markedly in the months following and have seemingly failed to provide Moscow with any meaningful advantage on the ground.</p> <p>The experience has some U.S. observers advising that we collectively pump the breaks on the idea — formally endorsed by the U.S. military and others governments — that cyberspace is now a fully fledged domain of war, comparable to land, air, sea and space. That’s one of the chief conclusions reached by Jon Bateman, a former cyber specialist at the Pentagon who has served as an advisor to the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the secretary of defense on military and cyber strategy, in a paper released shortly before the new year.</p> <p>“I think it’s fair for U.S. military and NATO and others to define cyber as an operational domain. That can be a helpful doctrinal concept. I think where it becomes misleading is when military and civilian leaders then assume that cyberspace is as consequential or major as these other domains, and that’s why the phrase ‘domain’ makes me a little uncomfortable because I think, rhetorically, it often carries that connotation,” said Bateman, now a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.</p> <p>Bateman spoke with SC Media about his paper and what the war in Ukraine can teach us about the proper role of offensive cyber operations in combat.</p> <p>Cyber “fires” need lots of fuel to be effective</p> <p>Bateman’s paper evaluates the effectiveness of Russian cyber wartime activities across two main areas: intelligence collection and creating cyber “fires,” or destructive and disruptive cyber attacks on strategic Ukrainian targets, such as the series of wiper malware attacks unleashed on public and private sector in the early days of the invasion and the hacking and disruption of ViaSat satellites that underpinned (some) of the Ukrainian military’s communications capabilities.</p> <p>But figures provided by a range of outside sources (including Microsoft, Mandiant and the CyberPeace Institute) show that after that initial spate of coordinated hacks, the frequency and cadence of Russia’s cyber volleys dropped off significantly, from five attacks measured in the first week of invasion to just once a week through October. Mandiant, one of the premiere threat intelligence organizations in the world, tracked just a single Russian cyberattack during a four-month period between June and September 2022.</p> <p>In any other context, a nation unleashing a different cyberattack every week against another nation would be considered a huge flurry of activity, but Bateman said in the grand scheme of Russia’s war operations — its targets and goals — it’s hard to look at that kind of output as meaningful.</p> <p>Figures provided by the Ukrainian government at the start of this year show a more active story.</p>

According to the Ukraine's State Special Communication and Information Protection Service (SSSCIP), the number of cyberattacks and incidents registered and investigated by their Computer Emergency Readiness Team since the start of the invasion has surpassed 1,500, though this figure presumably encompasses far more types of activity than the "cyber fires" that Bateman is attempting to track.

Most of the targets for those attacks were Ukrainian civil infrastructure, not military, and the cadence of those attacks has remained relatively consistent throughout the war.

"Cyberattack intensity [by Russia] remains at a certain constant level with minor deviations toward increase or decrease," the agency said in a January 2023 report.

It also shows how difficult it can be for even an apex predator nation-state cyber actor like Russia keep up that kind of cadence over long periods of time, particularly if they continue to execute on a range of other hacking and espionage-related priorities outside of their war zone.

It looks particularly minor in the face of the kind of disruption and destruction of the enemy's assets that can be waged with bombs and missiles. For years, policymakers in Kyiv and Washington have fretted about the vulnerability of their infrastructure to cyber-enabled disruption.

"Russia has targeted the power sector, telecommunications, financial sector, media companies, and these events have really put the entire world on urgent notice that protecting critical infrastructure has to be a top national security priority," Kiersten Todt, chief of staff for the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency told SC Media in an interview last year.

That fear led to expectations that a Russian invasion would bring with it a wave of digitally enabled disruption of Ukrainian critical infrastructure and [perhaps even](#) U.S. and Western countries supporting Kyiv. That has largely given way to a more conventional reality: kinetic action remains far faster, easier to carry out and more long-lasting.

Russia has been able to affect Ukraine's power and energy supply, but that has largely been done outside of cyberspace, such as bombing targets with its air force or artillery, or when Russian troops [seized control](#) of the Zaporizhzhya nuclear power plant in a risky March 2022 raid.

"If you do a one-to-one comparison, there is no comparison. Millions of Ukrainians are without power due to Russian missiles. On the other hand, not a single Ukrainian have lost power due to a cyberattack," said Bateman.

A global conflict brings many caveats

To be clear, there are numerous caveats and unique circumstances surrounding this war that are helping to shape its development and outside perceptions.

First: Ukraine is an unusually resilient target, with its leaders having spent much of the past decade hardening the cybersecurity of the military, ports, electrical grid and other critical infrastructure in the face of relentless Russian attacks in cyberspace following the 2014 invasion and takeover of Crimea.

Those defenses have been further augmented by a swell of financial and military support from the U.S. and Europe and agencies like Cyber Command, as well as assistance from a broad swath of private sector companies with global reach like Microsoft, Google, StarLink, and others providing infrastructure, equipment and technical assistance. Often this assistance is being provided at no cost, with government officials and executives citing a deep identification with Ukraine's fight against occupation against a longtime Western foe in Russia.

It's not at all clear how well Ukraine's cyber defenses would have stood up absent that support. Victor Zhora, head of Ukraine's State Special Communication Service, [told](#) the public in an event hosted by BlackBerry late last year that Russia's offensive potential in cyberspace preceding the war was "quite scary," with attacks like NotPetya and Industroyer wreaking havoc on Ukrainian infrastructure.

It's also an open question how much private-sector support other countries — like Taiwan — might receive from those same businesses in the wake of a potential invasion by China, where virtually all these companies are far more economically entangled.

“If you take that foreign support away, the cloud migration, the endpoint security support, Starlink, then yes, there would be a big difference in terms of the efficacy,” Bateman mused. “On the other hand, I don’t agree with those who view any one or all of these foreign sources of cybersecurity support as singularly decisive.”

Bateman also doesn’t discount the possibility that Russia is conducting other clandestine operations or campaigns outside the public view, and U.S. and Western analysts must often rely on the Ukrainian government — a party with a clear self-interest in downplaying the effectiveness of Russian cyber operations — for key accounts and figures. But he also notes that other third parties with their own unique visibility have largely supported the same conclusion.

“I’m skeptical that the reality is very different than what we’ve seen on the surface [of this conflict],” he said. “You can take a company like Microsoft, which has tremendous access to privileged data ... and yet even a company like Microsoft which has all the resources and incentives in the world to highlight the most consequential episodes have said Russia’s operations have had limited operational effect.”

Intelligence and espionage remain the best use-cases for wartime cyber operations

There is another major aspect to Russia’s wartime cyber operations that are far less visible to the public and that don’t rely on destructive efforts: intelligence gathering.

For Bateman, the Russian experience bolsters the argument that collecting battlefield intelligence, not setting “cyber fires,” is likely the most natural fit for offensive cyber operations in wartime. That view is largely backed up by Ukrainian military sources: the SSSCIP assessed that the primary goals of Russia’s cyber operations have been espionage and intelligence (such as obtaining logistical information for Ukraine’s military, information operations to spread panic throughout the civilian populace and “maximum destructive effect” of critical infrastructure.

But the war has thus far been defined by a series of brutal setbacks and strategic pivots by Russian troops as they were seemingly forced to abandon plans to capture or encircle Kyiv and have struggled to hold much of the territory they gained in the initial weeks after the invasion. While such cyber-enabled intelligence collection often happens below the level of public consciousness, the many failures of Russian troops on the ground hardly point to the kind of rousing success for intelligence collectors.

“The way I’d put it is intelligence collection is probably the bulk of what Russia has been doing in Ukrainian cyberspace. At the same time, I don’t think it’s been particularly effective for [them],” said Bateman.

Together, Russia’s struggles translating cyber power to on-the-ground war power likely points a need for U.S. policymakers to reevaluate the role that offensive cyber operations should be expected to play in a wartime setting and dedicate more thought to how its unique qualities might be leveraged in armed conflict.

“When I was in the Pentagon I would frequently hear leaders, often people who were not cyber specialists ... seem to think of or describe cyber operations as a strategic global strike capability that might be as important for a combatant commander to integrate as a cruise missile strike or something like that,” he said. “I think that’s overblown and that people need to pull back their expectations a little bit.”

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HEADLINE	01/09 Ransomware problems: macOS platforms
SOURCE	https://www.securityweek.com/microsoft-flags-ransomware-problems-apples-macos-platform

GIST	<p>Security researchers at Microsoft are flagging ransomware attacks on Apple's flagship macOS operating system, warning that financially motivated cybercriminals are abusing legitimate macOS functionalities to exploit vulnerabilities, evade defenses, or coerce users to infect their devices.</p> <p>In a blog post documenting its research into four known macOS ransomware families, Microsoft's Security Threat Intelligence team published IOCs and technical details to show how ransomware actors target users on macOS-powered devices.</p> <p>"While these malware families are old, they exemplify the range of capabilities and malicious behavior possible on the [Mac] platform," Redmond said, describing its work as a "technical reference" that researchers can use and build upon to understand Mac threats and improve protections.</p> <p>While the majority of ransomware attacks target Microsoft's own Windows operation system, the company is using the research to show that the threat is cross-platform. "Attackers [are] constantly evolving their techniques and expanding their tradecraft to cast a wider net of potential targets. This is evident in the range of industries, systems, and platforms affected by ransomware attacks. Understanding how ransomware works across these systems and platforms is critical in protecting today's hybrid device and work environments," Microsoft said.</p> <p>The research, which has been criticized by external researchers because of the availability of prior work, confirmed that the initial infection vector of Mac ransomware typically relies on user-assisted methods like downloading and running fake or trojanized applications.</p> <p>Microsoft said it also found that the malware can also arrive as a second-stage payload dropped or downloaded by other malware or part of a supply chain attack. Once running on a device, ransomware attacks usually comprise gaining access, execution, encrypting target users' files, and notifying the target with a ransom message.</p> <p>Microsoft said its researchers looked at four macOS ransomware families -- KeRanger, FileCoder, MacRansom, and EvilQuest -- to build detections for its own anti-malware product and to understand how ransomware attacks evolve on non-Windows platforms.</p> <p>This isn't the first time Microsoft has used its public blog to shine a spotlight on Apple's security hiccups. Recently, Redmond published details on a macOS Gatekeeper bypass vulnerability and called attention to a nasty macOS malware family that has evolved quickly from a basic information-gathering trojan to a stealthy backdoor with more powerful capabilities.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/09 ChatGPT used to develop malicious tools
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/chatgpt-develop-malicious-tools/
GIST	<p>Cyber-criminals have continued using OpenAI's ChatGPT to develop new malicious tools, including infostealers, multi-layer encryption tools and dark web marketplace scripts.</p> <p>The news comes from Check Point Research (CPR) experts, who published a new advisory about the findings last Friday.</p> <p>"In underground hacking forums, threat actors are creating infostealers, encryption tools and facilitating fraud activity," the company told <i>Infosecurity</i> via email.</p> <p>In particular, CPR discovered three cases of recent observations related to using ChatGPT for nefarious purposes.</p> <p>The first one, spotted in a dark web forum on December 29, 2022, relates to recreating malware strains and techniques described in research publications and write-ups about common malware.</p>

"In actuality, whilst this individual could be a tech-oriented threat actor, these posts seemed to be demonstrating [to] less technically capable cyber-criminals how to utilize ChatGPT for malicious purposes, with real examples they can immediately use," wrote CPR.

The second type of malicious activity observed by the security researchers in December 2022 describes the creation of a multi-layered encryption tool in the Python programming language.

"This could mean that potential cyber-criminals who have little to no development skills at all could leverage ChatGPT to develop malicious tools and become fully-fledged cyber-criminals with technical capabilities," explained CPR.

Finally, the team spotted a cyber-criminal writing a tutorial on how to create dark web marketplace scripts using ChatGPT.

"The marketplace's main role in the underground illicit economy is to provide a platform for the automated trade of illegal or stolen goods like stolen accounts or payment cards, malware, or even drugs and ammunition, with all payments in cryptocurrencies," reads the [advisory](#).

According to Sergey Shykevich, threat intelligence group manager at CPR, ChatGPT can be used for good to assist developers in writing code, but it can also be used for malicious purposes, as proven by the aforementioned cases.

"Although the tools that we analyze in this report are pretty basic, it's only a matter of time until more sophisticated threat actors enhance the way they use AI-based tools," Shykevich warned. "CPR will continue to investigate ChatGPT-related cybercrime in the weeks ahead."

Additionally, Check Point data group manager Omer Dembinsky predicts AI tools like ChatGPT [will continue to fuel](#) cyber-attacks in 2023.

The advisory comes weeks after cybersecurity experts first warned that ChatGPT [could democratize cybercrime](#).

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HEADLINE	01/09 PurpleUrchin bypasses captchas
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/purpleurchin-bypasses-captchas/
GIST	<p>The South African threat actors known as "Automated Libra" have been improving their techniques to exploit cloud platform resources for cryptocurrency mining.</p> <p>According to Palo Alto Networks Unit 42, the threat actors have used a new Captcha-solving system alongside a more aggressive use of CPU resources for mining and the mix of "freejacking" with the "Play and Run" technique.</p> <p>From a technical standpoint, freejacking is generally understood as the process of using free (or limited-time) cloud resources to perform cryptomining operations.</p> <p>"While freejacking may, on its surface, seem like a victimless crime, these patterns of abuse could have serious downstream consequences if they start to target paid enterprises who rely on cloud infrastructure for operations, data storage, and more," explained Dig Security CEO Dan Benjamin.</p> <p>As for Automated Libra, the group was first exposed by analysts at Sysdig in October 2022, who named the malicious cluster of activity "PurpleUrchin" and associated the group with freejacking operations.</p> <p>Now, Palo Alto resources have said they collected more than 250 GB of container data from the PurpleUrchin operation and discovered that the hackers behind it were creating three to five GitHub accounts every minute during the peak of their operations in November 2022.</p>

"We also found that some of the automated account creation cases bypassed Captcha images using simple image analysis techniques," reads the Unit 42 advisory.

"We also identified the creation of more than 130,000 user accounts created on various cloud platform services like Heroku, Togglebox and GitHub."

Further, the team found evidence of unpaid balances on some of these cloud service platforms from several created accounts, hinting that the actors created fake accounts with stolen or counterfeit credit cards.

"With this finding, we assess that the actors behind PurpleUrchin operations stole cloud resources from several cloud service platforms through a tactic Unit 42 researchers call 'Play and Run,'" Unit 42 wrote.

"This tactic involves malicious actors using cloud resources and refusing to pay for those resources once the bill arrives."

According to Davis McCarthy, a principal security researcher at [Valtix](#), between bypassing security controls like Captchas or using stolen credit cards to foot the bill, this operation showcases the depth of the threat landscape.

"Organizations should operationalize this intelligence to determine if this type of attack can impact them – cyber-criminals won't stop their attempts to monetize underpinning compute and storage resources that make up most cloud services," McCarthy told *Infosecurity*.

The Palo Alto Networks advisory comes a few months after Netskope's *Threat Labs Report* suggested that Microsoft OneDrive was the [most exploited cloud app](#) for delivering malicious content in 2022.

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HEADLINE	01/09 Darknet drug markets eye custom apps
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/darknet-drug-markets-move-to-custom-android-apps-for-increased-privacy/
GIST	<p>Online markets selling drugs and other illegal substances on the dark web have started to use custom Android apps for increased privacy and to evade law enforcement.</p> <p>Besides ordering, these apps allow shop clients to communicate with drug vendors and provide specific courier instructions for delivery.</p> <p>This new trend has been observed by analysts at Resecurity around the beginning of the third quarter of 2022. It is thought to be a response to last year's high-profile darknet market crackdowns, most notably that of Hydra Market.</p> <p>Hydra was the leader in drug sales, having 19,000 registered sellers and 17 million customers worldwide. In April 2022, the German authorities confiscated its servers, creating a vacuum in the field.</p> <p>Drug dealers moving to Android</p> <p>As Resecurity reports today, several small players attempted to take advantage of Hydra's sudden demise and snatch parts of Hydra's orphaned user base.</p> <p>Seven notable examples that released Android app APKs for customers to use to access their shops and services are:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Yakudza▪ TomFord24▪ 24Deluxe▪ PNTS32

- Flakka24
- 24Cana
- MapSTGK

All seven of the above use the same M-Club CMS engine to build their APKs, so they likely used the same developer services.

"Some of these mobile apps have been recently observed by our experts on seized mobile devices by law enforcement - they belong to several suspects involved in drug trafficking and other illegal operations," warned Resecurity.

"The mobile apps provide the ability to transfer details about successful drug orders, and they can also send geographical coordinates of the "package" left by the courier for further pick-up," explains Resecurity in [the report](#).

"Such information is transmitted in the form of an image to prevent possible indexing. [...] notes may contain details how deep the "package" has been hidden under the ground or any other information to find it."

When this information exchange happens on several different applications, it creates fragmentation and stretches the ability of law enforcement to track everything and proceed to arrests.

Resecurity believes most new marketplaces to be launched in 2023 will feature an Android app, gradually replacing privacy-risking forums and open market platforms.

New big players

The most prominent drug market platforms have not bothered adopting the Android app trend yet and instead focus on the new fight for supremacy in the field, which might give one of them a monopoly similar to what Hydra has achieved.

According to Resecurity, those who benefited the most from Hydra's shutdown were RuTor, WayAway, Legalizer, OMG!, Solaris, and Nemesis.

Over the past summer, these markets collectively welcomed 795,000 new users.

With no clear market leader right now and the reputation of all platforms (and vendors) being volatile, this is a risky period for people who purchase counterfeit substances, low-quality ingredients, or something different from what they ordered, ultimately being extremely dangerous.

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HEADLINE	01/09 Fake OnlyFans sites abuse open redirect
SOURCE	https://www.bleepingcomputer.com/news/security/fake-onlyfans-dating-sites-abuse-uk-environment-agency-open-redirect/
GIST	<p>Threat actors abused an open redirect on the official website of the United Kingdom's Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (DEFRA) to direct visitors to fake OnlyFans adult dating sites.</p> <p>OnlyFans is a content subscription service where paid subscribers get access to private photos, videos, and posts from adult models, celebrities, and social media personalities.</p> <p>As it is a widely used site, and the name is recognizable, threat actors have created a series of fake OnlyFans adult dating sites to gain subscribers or steal people's personal information.</p> <p>Abusing open redirect on DEFRA</p> <p>As part of this malicious campaign, threat actors abused an open redirect at that looked like a legitimate U.K. government link but redirected visitors to the fake OnlyFans dating site.</p>

Redirects are legitimate URLs on website web addresses that automatically redirect users from the initial site to another URL, commonly at an external site.

For example, a website could have a redirect like www.example.com/redirect/www.google.com, which, when clicked, automatically redirects the user to Google.

An [open redirect](#) can be modified by anyone, allowing threat actors and scammers to create redirects from a legitimate site to any site they want.

This allows threat actors to abuse open redirects and cause legitimate links to appear in search results that send visitors to websites under their control to display phishing forms or deliver malware.

The malicious campaign abusing the open redirect on DEFRA's river conditions site was discovered last week by analysts at Pen Test Partners, who shared their findings with BleepingComputer.

"On Tuesday afternoon, one of my colleagues Adam Bromiley noticed an open redirect on the UK's Environment Agency web site. It popped up during a Google search whilst he was looking for SoC (hardware System on Chip) datasheets!," explained [the report](#) by Pen Test Partners.

These redirects were listed as Google search results promoting porn and adult site likely after being added to websites that were then indexed by Google's indexing bots.

For example, when the [rvzqo.impresivedate\[.\]com](http://rvzqo.impresivedate[.]com) site is first opened, it displays a large animated OnlyFans logo, followed by the following fake dating site.

These fake OnlyFans sites prompt the user to answer a series of questions regarding the type of "date" they are looking for and ultimately redirect them once again to adult "cheating" sites.

While most '.gov.uk' sites accept security reports via HackerOne, the Environment Agency is not part of the program. Therefore, there was a 24-hour delay between finding the open redirect and reporting it to the right person at Defra.

The abused DEFRA domain at "riverconditions.environment-agency.gov.uk" was taken offline, and its DNS records were removed approximately 48 hours after Pen Test Partners submitted their report. Unfortunately, the website is still unreachable at the time of writing this.

At the same time, [a second researcher](#) noticed the same issue via Google Search results and publicly disclosed the issue on Twitter.

BleepingComputer contacted DEFRA about the redirect attack and was told that the agency was aware of the technical issues and moved the content to a [new location](#) that can still be accessed.

"We are aware of the technical issues with the River Thames conditions website. Our teams have worked quickly to move the content to a new site which the public can now easily access," a U.K. Environment Agency spokesperson told BleepingComputer.

The abuse of government open redirect sites to push adult phishing sites is not new.

In 2020, a malicious SEO campaign abused an [open redirect on numerous U.S. government websites](#), such as weather.gov, to redirect visitors to porn sites.

Another malicious campaign that year [abused an open redirect on HHS.gov](#) to redirect visitors to COVID-19 phishing sites that spread malware.

	More recently, we reported on attackers exploiting open redirects on the Snapchat and American Express sites to lead visitors to Microsoft 365 phishing sites.
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HEADLINE	01/09 CISA: Hitachi Energy high-severity flaws
SOURCE	https://www.securityweek.com/cisa-notifies-hitachi-energy-customers-high-severity-vulnerabilities?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>The US Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) published advisories last week to inform organizations using Hitachi Energy products about several recently addressed critical and high-severity vulnerabilities.</p> <p>CISA has published three advisories describing security flaws in three products made by energy solutions provider Hitachi Energy. The vendor published its own advisories for the vulnerabilities in December. The advisories, hosted on ABB's website, were released just weeks before ABB announced that it had completed the sale of its remaining stake in Hitachi Energy to Hitachi.</p> <p>One CISA advisory describes five high-severity vulnerabilities in UNEM, a component of Hitachi Energy's network management system (NMS). The issues are related to encryption and user credentials, and they can be exploited to obtain sensitive information and make malicious modifications to the system. Network access to the targeted system is required for exploitation.</p> <p>A different advisory was published for the impact of the same five vulnerabilities on Foxman-UN, a different product in the NMS suite.</p> <p>The third advisory describes three flaws affecting OpenSSL and Zlib, which are used by Hitachi Energy's Lumada Asset Performance Management (APM) product.</p> <p>The OpenSSL issues have been classified as 'high severity' and they can be exploited to cause a denial-of-service (DoS) condition, while the Zlib vulnerability is 'critical' and it could allow, in addition to DoS attacks, arbitrary code execution.</p> <p>Hitachi has released updates that should address most of the vulnerabilities, and some issues will be fixed in the upcoming period.</p> <p>When its advisories were published, Hitachi Energy was not aware of any of the vulnerabilities being publicly disclosed or exploited for malicious purposes.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/09 Cyberattack volume surges 38% in 2022
SOURCE	https://www.infosecurity-magazine.com/news/global-cyberattack-volume-surges/?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>The number of cyber-attacks recorded last year was nearly two-fifths (38%) greater than the total volume observed in 2021, according to Check Point.</p> <p>The security vendor claimed the increase was largely due to a surge in attacks on healthcare organizations, which saw the largest year-on-year (YoY) increase (74%), and the activities of smaller, more agile hacking groups.</p> <p>Overall, attacks reached an all-time high in Q4 with an average of 1168 weekly attacks per organization. The average weekly figures for the year were highest for education sector organizations (2314), government and military (1661) and healthcare (1463).</p> <p>Threat actors appear to have capitalized on gaps in security created by the shift to remote working and studying, according to Omer Dembinsky, Check Point data group manager.</p>

	<p>“The ransomware ecosystem is continuing to evolve and grow with smaller, more agile criminal groups that form to evade law enforcement,” he argued.</p> <p>“Second, hackers are widening their aim to target business collaboration tools such as Slack, Teams, OneDrive and Google Drive with phishing exploits. These make for a rich source of sensitive data given that most organizations’ employees continue to work remotely.”</p> <p>Dembinsky predicted that AI tools like ChatGPT would help to fuel a continued surge in attacks in 2023 by making it quicker and easier for bad actors to generate malicious code and emails.</p> <p>Recorded cyber-attacks on US organizations grew 57% YoY in 2022, while the figure was even higher in the UK (77%) .</p> <p>This chimes with data from UK ISP Beaming, which found that 2022 was the busiest year on record for attacks.</p> <p>It recorded 687,489 attempts to breach UK businesses in 2022 – the equivalent of one attack every 46 seconds.</p> <p>October–December 2022 was the busiest quarter since Beaming began tracking these stats in 2016. Its customers experienced 177,228 cyber-attacks each, on average, during the period.</p> <p>“Most cyber-attacks use automated scripts that scour the internet for the weakest links,” warned Beaming managing director, Sonia Blizzard.</p> <p>“Businesses that haven’t improved their online resilience in the last year or so are sitting ducks for hackers.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/09 Serbia govt. reports ‘massive DDoS attack’
SOURCE	https://therecord.media/serbian-government-reports-massive-ddos-attack-amid-heightened-tensions-in-balkans/?web_view=true
GIST	<p>The Serbian government announced on Saturday that the website and IT infrastructure of its Ministry of Internal Affairs had been hit by several “massive” distributed denial-of-service (DDoS) attacks.</p> <p>“So far five large attacks aimed at disabling the IT infrastructure of the Ministry of Interior have been repelled,” said Belgrade, adding that government employees and staff from state-owned Telekom Srbija (Telecom Serbia) were able to counter the attacks.</p> <p>“Enhanced security protocols have been activated, which can lead to slower work and occasional interruptions of certain services, all in order to protect the data of the Ministry of Internal Affairs,” the Serbian government added.</p> <p>The DDoS attacks — which work by flooding targeted websites with junk traffic, making them unreachable — come amid a spate of similar incidents claimed by Russian-supporting groups in the context of the invasion of Ukraine, although no group has claimed to be behind the attempts to take the Serbian website and services offline.</p> <p>While Serbia has historically enjoyed warm relations with Russia, its president Aleksandar Vucic refused to recognize the results of the referendums which Russia held last year in partially-occupied Ukrainian territory.</p> <p>An analysis by the Council on Foreign Relations suggested that the war in Ukraine could be undermining Russia’s influence in the region.</p>

However heightened tensions in the Balkans, which have recently seen violent clashes between ethnic Serbs in northern Kosovo and the ethnic Albanian authorities, have prompted Kosovo's prime minister Albin Kurti to accuse Russia of attempting to inflame ethnic tensions.

"Now that Russia got severely wounded in Ukraine after its invasion and aggression, they have interest in spillover. They have interest in outsourcing their war-mongering drive to the Balkans where they have a client who's in Belgrade," said Kurti.

In the northern part of Kosovo, a country which declared independence from Serbia in 2008 — and which Serbia does not recognise — Serbian nationalist organizations with reported ties to the Wagner paramilitary group have threatened to confront NATO troops.

Vucic said on Sunday that the NATO-led peacekeeping Kosovo Force (KFOR) refused to allow him to deploy up to 1,000 military and police personnel to the territory in response to recent clashes, per its powers under a U.N. Security Council resolution.

It was the first request to deploy troops which Serbia had made since the conclusion of the Yugoslav Wars and followed the arrest of a member of the Kosovo Security Force on suspicion of shooting and injuring two young Serbs, aged 11 and 21, while off-duty.

Tensions in northern Kosovo have also been catalyzed by elections which the Kosovar authorities have now delayed and which Serb community leaders threatened to boycott.

Serbia's defense minister said that the Serbian Armed Forces had been placed at the "highest level of combat readiness" in late December amid unverified claims from Serbian state media that Kosovar police had opened fire on a blockade erected in protest against the arrest of a former Serb police officer.

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HEADLINE	01/09 Phishing: Facebook termination notice
SOURCE	https://www.avanan.com/blog/facebook-termination-notices-leads-to-phishing?&web_view=true
GIST	<p>Last year, we wrote about a number of different Facebook-inspired attacks. See here and here for examples.</p> <p>These attacks primarily took advantage of the site's Ad Manager service. Essentially, an end-user would receive a report that their ad account was at risk of termination—unless they took decisive action, now.</p> <p>That action, of course, would lead to credentials being stolen.</p> <p>It's a New Year, but the attacks are still flowing from these spoofed Facebook accounts.</p> <p>In this attack brief, researchers at Avanan, a Check Point Software Company, will discuss how hackers are leveraging Facebook copyright infringement notices to steal credentials.</p> <p>Attack</p> <p>In this attack, hackers are sending fake Facebook copyright infringement notices in the hopes of getting credentials.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Vector: Email• Type: Credential Harvesting• Techniques: Social Engineering, Impersonation• Target: Any end-user <p>This email says that a Facebook account has been suspended. The reason given is that a photo uploaded to the account's page has violated Facebook's copyright infringement policy.</p>

	<p>In order to appeal this suspension, you have to, within 24 hours, make an appeal to avoid suspension. Otherwise, the account will be permanently suspended.</p> <p>The link does not go to a Meta page, but rather a credential-harvesting page.</p> <p><u>Techniques</u></p> <p>The best phishing emails are believable and play on urgency.</p> <p>Though this email has a sender address that clearly does not come from Facebook, it's otherwise fairly believable. Though we blurred it out, it mentions the page's name. The link, on first look, appears to be believable (although when hovering over it, you'll see that it does not go to a Facebook-related page).</p> <p>Where the user might be tempted is the idea that their account will be suspended within 24 hours. Think about it: If your organization relies on its Facebook page for advertisement, awareness and other business activities, having it permanently suspended will be quite difficult to overcome. Filing a quick appeal seems reasonable.</p> <p>That's where the hackers try to get you. And they are having success, as evidenced by the waves of these emails we're seeing. When we see a number of similar attacks spoofing the same brand, we know that the hackers are getting people to bite.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/09 Belarus legalizes pirating media from West
SOURCE	https://www.vice.com/en/article/n7zpw/russia-ally-belarus-legalizes-pirating-media-from-unfriendly-nations
GIST	<p>The government of Belarus, which has remained an ally of Russia throughout the invasion of Ukraine, has temporarily legalized the piracy of media and intellectual property from "unfriendly" nations.</p> <p>The law, which is dated January 3 on pravo.by—Belarus' national portal for legal decisions—was passed by the government in late December and will remain in force until the end of 2024. It effectively legalizes the internet piracy of digital goods including computer software, movies, and music, if the rights holder resides in "foreign states that commit unfriendly actions against Belarusian legal entities and (or) individuals."</p> <p>Belarus has long been subject to sanctions at varying levels, since President Alexander Lukashenko—who has referred to himself as Europe's "last dictator"—took power in 1994. Further sanctions were introduced by the West after Lukashenko's regime cracked down on internal dissent in 2020 following elections widely recognized as fraudulent. After Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the nation has faced further restrictions on trade involving technology supporting defense, aerospace, and maritime industries. Among other major companies, Amazon, Intel, and Airbnb stopped serving Belarus, and so did CD Projekt Red, the Polish video game company behind <i>Cyberpunk 2077</i> and <i>The Witcher</i> games.</p> <p>Specifically, the law authorizes the use of foreign media and IP products within Belarus from countries that have sanctioned it without the permission of rights holders. The law states that the government will still collect royalties for the use of that material, but the royalties will be held by the patent authority. If the rights holders don't collect the royalties within three years—unlikely for companies barred by law from doing business in Belarus—the funds will be absorbed by the government budget.</p> <p>The law also covers physical goods, and authorizes the import of certain goods without the consent of rights holders in order to avoid "a critical shortage in the domestic market of food and other products."</p>
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HEADLINE	01/09 NJ bars TikTok from state devices
SOURCE	https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2023/jan/9/nj-governor-bars-tiktok-other-platforms-from-state/

GIST	<p>TRENTON, N.J. — New Jersey Democratic Gov. Phil Murphy said Monday that his administration is barring certain “high risk” social media platforms like TikTok on state devices.</p> <p>The decision applies to state agencies under the executive branch and comes as a third of U.S. states have moved to prohibit the platform on government devices. New Jersey is among just a few Democrat-led states to bar such platforms.</p> <p>“The proactive and preventative measures that we are implementing today will ensure the confidentiality, integrity, and safety of information assets managed by New Jersey State government,” Murphy said in a statement.</p> <p>It’s unclear what will become of the state’s NJGov TikTok account, which has more than 56,000 and more than a half-million likes.</p> <p>Murphy’s directive allows for certain “compelling State business” with a public interest reason for using the technology to request an exception.</p> <p>Congress recently banned TikTok from most U.S. government-issued devices over bipartisan concerns about security and the spread of misinformation through the app.</p> <p>TikTok is owned by ByteDance, a Chinese company that moved its headquarters to Singapore in 2020. TikTok has said that it prioritizes its community’s privacy and security and that it is working to address security concerns raised by the U.S.</p> <p>“We’re disappointed that so many states are jumping on the political bandwagon to enact policies that will do nothing to advance cybersecurity in their states and are based on unfounded falsehoods about TikTok,” spokesperson Jamal Brown said Monday in an emailed statement.</p> <p>He added that the company is working with the federal government to “finalize a solution” to address states’ security concerns.</p> <p>New Jersey’s prohibition also includes WeChat and Alibaba.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/10 AI more conversant, but more honest?
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/10/science/character-ai-chatbot-intelligence.html
GIST	<p>On a recent afternoon Jonas Thiel, a socioeconomics major at a college in northern Germany, spent more than an hour chatting online with some of the left-wing political philosophers he had been studying. These were not the actual philosophers but virtual recreations, brought to conversation, if not quite life, by sophisticated chatbots on a website called Character.AI.</p> <p>Mr. Thiel’s favorite was a bot that imitated Karl Kautsky, a Czech-Austrian socialist who died before World War Two. When Mr. Thiel asked Kautsky’s digital avatar to provide some advice for modern-day socialists struggling to rebuild the worker’s movement in Germany, Kautsky-bot suggested that they launch a newspaper. “They can use it not only as a means of spreading socialist propaganda, which is in short supply in Germany for the time being, but also to organize working class people,” the bot said.</p> <p>Kautsky-bot went on to argue that the working classes would eventually “come to their senses” and embrace a modern-day Marxist revolution. “The proletariat is at a low point in their history right now,” it wrote. “They will eventually realize the flaws in capitalism, especially because of climate change.”</p> <p>Over the course of several days, Mr. Thiel met with other virtual scholars, including G.A. Cohen and Adolph Reed Jr. But he could have picked almost anyone, live or dead, real or imagined. At Character.AI, which emerged this summer, users can chat with reasonable facsimiles of everyone from Queen Elizabeth or William Shakespeare to Billie Eilish or Elon Musk (there are several versions). Anyone you want to invoke, or concoct, is available for conversation. The company and site, founded by Daniel De Freitas and</p>

Noam Shazeer, two former Google researchers, is among the many efforts to build a new kind of chatbot. These bots cannot chat exactly like a human, but they often seem to.

In late November, OpenAI, a San Francisco artificial intelligence lab, unveiled [a bot called ChatGPT](#) that left more than a million people feeling as if they were chatting with another human being. Similar technologies are under development at Google, Meta and other tech giants. Some companies have been reluctant to share the technology with the wider public. Because these bots learn their skills from data posted to the internet by real people, they often generate untruths, hate speech and language that is biased against women and people of color. If misused, they could become a more efficient way of running the kind of misinformation campaign that has become commonplace in recent years.

“Without any additional guardrails in place, they are just going to end up reflecting all the biases and toxic information that is already on the web,” said Margaret Mitchell, a former A.I. researcher at Microsoft and Google, where she helped start its Ethical A.I. team. She is now with the A.I. start-up Hugging Face.

But other companies, including Character.AI, are confident that the public will learn to accept the flaws of chatbots and develop a healthy distrust of what they say. Mr. Thiel found that the bots at Character.AI had both a talent for conversation and a knack for impersonating real-life people. “If you read what someone like Kautsky wrote in the 19th century, he does not use the same language we use today,” he said. “But the A.I. can somehow translate his ideas into ordinary modern English.”

For the moment, these and other advanced chatbots are a source of entertainment. And they are quickly becoming [a more powerful way of interacting with machines](#). Experts are still debating whether the strengths of these technologies will outweigh their flaws and [potential for harm](#), but they agree on one point: The believability of make-believe conversation will continue to improve.

The art of conversation

In 2015 Mr. De Freitas, then working as a software engineer at Microsoft, read a research paper published by scientists at Google Brain, the flagship artificial intelligence lab at Google. Detailing what it called “[A Neural Conversational Model](#),” the paper showed how a machine could learn the art of conversation by analyzing dialogue transcripts from hundreds of movies.

The paper described what A.I. researchers call a [neural network](#), a mathematical system loosely modeled on the web of neurons in the brain. This same technology also [translates between Spanish and English](#) on services like Google Translate and identifies pedestrians and traffic signs for [self-driving cars navigating city streets](#).

A neural network learns skills by pinpointing patterns in enormous amounts of digital data. By analyzing thousands of cat photos, for instance, it can learn to recognize a cat.

The neural system described in the Google paper was far from perfect but seemed to chat like a real person every once in a while:

Human: what 's your name ?

Machine: i 'm julia .

Human: when were you born ?

Machine: july 20th .

Human: what year were you born ?

Machine: 1977 .

Human: where are you from ?

Machine: i 'm out in the boonies.

Human: are you a man or a woman ?

Machine: i 'm a woman .

Human: why are we here ?

Machine: i 'm not sure .

When Mr. De Freitas read the paper, he was not yet an A.I. researcher; he was a software engineer working on search engines. But what he really wanted was to take Google's idea to its logical extreme.

"You could tell this bot could generalize," he said. "What it said did not look like what was in a movie script."

He moved to Google in 2017. Officially, he was an engineer on YouTube, the company's video-sharing site. But for his "20 percent time" project — a Google tradition that lets employees explore new ideas alongside their daily obligations — he began building his own chatbot.

The idea was to train a neural network using a much larger collection of dialogue: reams of chat logs culled from social media services and other sites across the internet. The idea was simple, but it would require enormous amounts of computer processing power. Even a supercomputer would need weeks or even months to analyze all that data.

As a Google engineer, he held a few credits that allowed him to run experimental software across the company's vast network of computer data centers. But these credits would grant only a small fraction of the computing power needed to train his chatbot. So he started borrowing credits from other engineers; as the system analyzed more data, its skills would improve by leaps and bounds.

Initially, he trained his chatbot using what is called an LSTM, [for Long Short-Term Memory](#) — a neural network designed in the 1990s specifically for natural language. But he soon switched to a new kind of neural network called a transformer, developed by a team of Google A.I. researchers that included Noam Shazeer.

Unlike an LSTM, which reads text one word at a time, a transformer can use multiple computer processors to analyze an entire document in a single step.

Google, OpenAI and other organizations were already using transformers to build what are called "[large language models](#)," systems suited for a wide range of language tasks, from writing tweets to answering questions. Still working on his own, Mr. De Freitas focused the idea on conversation, feeding his transformer as much dialogue as possible.

It was an exceedingly simple approach. But as Mr. De Freitas likes to say: "Simple solutions for incredible results."

The result in this case was a chatbot that [he called Meena](#). It was so effective that Google Brain hired Mr. De Freitas and turned his project into an official research effort. Meena became LaMDA, short for Language Model for Dialogue Applications.

The project spilled into the public consciousness early last summer when another Google engineer, Blake Lemoine, [told The Washington Post that LaMDA was sentient](#). This assertion was an exaggeration, [to say the least](#). But the brouhaha showed how quickly chatbots were improving inside top labs like Google Brain and OpenAI.

Google was reluctant to release the technology, worried that its knack for misinformation and other toxic language could damage the company brand. But by this time Mr. De Freitas and Mr. Shazeer had left Google, determined to get this kind of technology into the hands of as many people as possible through their new company, Character.AI.

"The technology is useful today — for fun, for emotional support, for generating ideas, for all kinds of creativity," Mr. Shazeer said.

Designed for 'plausible conversation'

ChatGPT, [the bot released by OpenAI to much fanfare in late November](#), was designed to operate as a new kind of question-and-answer engine. It is pretty good in this role, but the user never knows when the

chatbot will just make something up. It may tell you that the official currency of Switzerland is the euro (it's actually the Swiss franc) or that Mark Twain's Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County could not only jump but talk. A.I. researchers call this generation of untruths "hallucination."

In building Character.AI, Mr. De Freitas and Mr. Shazeer had a different objective: open-ended conversation. They believe that today's chatbots are better suited to this kind of service, for now a means of entertainment, factual or not. As every page on the site notes, "Everything Characters say is made up!"

"These systems are not designed for truth," Mr. Shazeer said. "They are designed for plausible conversation."

Mr. De Freitas, Mr. Shazeer and their colleagues did not build one bot that imitates Elon Musk and another that mimics Queen Elizabeth and a third that parrots William Shakespeare. They built a single system that can imitate all those people and countless others.

It has learned from reams of general dialogue as well as from articles, news stories, books and other digital text describing people like Elon Musk, Queen Elizabeth and William Shakespeare.

The system also has a way of combining disparate concepts learned during training. The result is a practically endless collection of bots that can imitate a practically endless collection of people, riffing on a practically endless number of topics, as Mr. Thiel found when he chatted with the Karl Kautsky bot: JonasThiel: Marxists in your time were very confident that revolution was a historical inevitability. In light of recent defeats socialists across the world have suffered and the lack of class struggle, even in times of great suffering, do you think it is time to revise that view?

Karl Kautsky: I do not. We may have made mistakes with our tactics, but I refuse to believe that socialism is a pipe dream. I still believe that the proletariat must break the chains of capitalism, and that the working class must unite around marxism. We must remember that capitalism is still deeply flawed and that it is our job as socialists to agitate and spread class consciousness.

JonasThiel: I completely agree, but wasn't it wrong to assume workers uniting to overthrow the bourgeoisie was inevitable? After all, the capitalist class is very powerful and it is hard for workers to come together to resist collectively rather than individually.

Karl Kautsky: You are right, it was a mistake to be over optimistic in that regard. But I find it better to believe in class consciousness and revolution until I am proven wrong. What is the alternative? Believing the workers will stay in chains forever? I don't agree with that. It is better to struggle against capitalism despite our odds than to give in. I refuse to believe the workers will never wake up. Even if I am over optimistic, we must not give in to pessimism. I refuse to be proved wrong. I hope you can understand.

Sometimes, the chatbot gets things right. Sometimes, it doesn't. When Mr. Thiel chatted with an avatar meant to imitate Mr. Reed, the 20th-century American political thinker, it turned him into "some kind of militant Maoist, which is definitely not right."

Like Google and OpenAI and other top labs, Mr. De Freitas, Mr. Shazeer and their colleagues plan on training their system with ever larger amounts of digital data. This training can take months, and millions of dollars; it can also sharpen the skills of the artificial conversationalist.

Researchers say that the rapid improvement of the past several years will last only so long. Richard Socher, former head of A.I. at Salesforce who now runs a start-up called You.com, believes these exponential improvements will begin to level off over the next few years, when language models reach a point when they have analyzed pretty much all the text on the internet.

But Mr. Shazeer believes the runway is much longer. "There are billions of people in the world generating text all the time," he said. "People will keep spending more and more money to train smarter and smarter systems. We are nowhere near the end of that trend."

HEADLINE	01/09 Iowa school district cancels classes: hack
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/iowa-education-86919ed45dd719c40a9708c3bf3ad199
GIST	<p>DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) — Iowa’s largest school district cancelled classes for Tuesday after determining there was a cyber attack on its technology network.</p> <p>Des Moines Public Schools announced Monday that classes would be cancelled for its 33,000 students after being “alerted to a cyber security incident on its technology network.”</p> <p>The district said in a news release that it took its internet and network services offline while it assessed the situation. It didn’t describe the nature of the attack or say whether sensitive information might have been stolen, and it didn’t immediately respond to a request for further information.</p> <p>“Because many technology tools that support both classroom learning as well as the management and operation of the school district are not available at this time, the prudent decision is to close the district for the day,” the district said.</p> <p>The district will decide Tuesday afternoon whether to hold classes Wednesday, spokesman Phil Roeder said.</p> <p>Sports and other activities were cancelled at Des Moines schools Tuesday, but teams will be allowed to compete at schools outside the district, Roeder said.</p>
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Terrorism, Extremism

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HEADLINE	01/10 TTP announces shadow government
SOURCE	https://newsroomodisha.com/ttp-announces-shadow-government-as-fighting-with-pakistan-intensifies/
GIST	<p>The Pakistan Taliban more formally called Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan (TTP), signalling that it aspires to form a full-fledged state, has announced that it was dividing the outfit into various “ministries”, The Khorasan Diary Twitter handle revealed.</p> <p>The TTP announced appointments for the ministries of Defence, Judiciary, Information, Political affairs, Economic Affairs, Education, and Intelligence along with the setting up of a fatwa issuing authority and a department for construction.</p> <p>The “Defence Ministry” is headed by Mufti Muzahim. He is designated by the US State Department as a terrorist. The “ministry” is divided into North and South zones with the former including Peshawar, Malakand, Mardan, Gilgit Baltistan & Hazara “wilaya” and the latter DIKhan, Bannu, Kohat and Zhob “wilaya”.</p> <p>The geographical contours reveal that as of now the TTP is targeting the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa as well as Gilgit-Baltistan as part of its future state.</p> <p>The group also announced that it has established a “Special Isteshhadi Force”. This is a squadron of suicide bombers. Given the psychological edge that the force provides, the TTP has released a new video “We are ready, Part-2”, which spotlights the “Special Istishadi Force”.</p> <p>Besides, two operational camps are being set up under the “Al Farooq Foundation”.</p> <p>Significantly, the TTP’s intelligence directorate is headed by the group’s chief Noor Wali Mehsud himself. Separately, the TTP is trying to drive a wedge between Pakistani religious scholars and the state.</p>

	<p>In a recent video, Mehsud urged the Pakistani ulema to refrain from labelling the TTP as terrorists. In a typical cloak-and-dagger game, he points out that the ceasefire will stay intact if the Pakistani government also upholds it.</p> <p>The TTP made headlines recently by taking over a counter-terrorism centre in Bannu. Pakistani commandos could take back the Counter Terrorism Department (CDT) facility, located inside the cantonment after suffering heavy losses. Suicide bombers then struck inside capital Islamabad, marking a significant psychological victory.</p> <p>There have been several other attacks including the killing of two ISI operatives working with the CDT.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/09 Plea deal? 9/11 trial delayed again
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/news/justice/2023-kicks-off-911-gitmo-hearings-delayed-again
GIST	<p>Pretrial hearings for the yet-to-start 9/11 trial at Guantanamo Bay have been canceled again as the Biden administration seeks to strike a plea deal with the al Qaeda plotters, which could take the death penalty off the table.</p> <p>After more than 21 years, justice has yet to be attained in the case against the plotters of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and nearly a year of plea negotiations and canceled hearings at Guantanamo Bay has pushed any trial back even further.</p> <p>In December 2022, the presiding military judge for the case at the island war court canceled the hearings that were slated to span from mid-January to early February 2023, and at least some defense teams want the March 2023 hearings to be postponed too.</p> <p>The defense team for alleged 9/11 hijacking trainer Walid bin Attash told the court in early December 2022 that the scheduled multiweek hearings for late January and early February 2023 should be canceled, the prosecution did not object, and the presiding judge granted the cancellation.</p> <p>Negotiations between prosecutors and defense attorneys at Guantanamo Bay, which began in March 2022, could reportedly result in guilty plea deals in which capital punishment would not be a possible punishment for 9/11 mastermind Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and his four co-defendants.</p> <p>In the more than two decades since the terror attacks that killed nearly 3,000 people, the five men said to be responsible for the planning and execution of the plot have yet to stand trial.</p> <p>As reasons for wanting the early 2023 hearings canceled, the defense team's December 2022 motion cited "the on-going plea negotiations between Trial Counsel and the Defense that include the review of the 'Policy Principles' by various levels" of the Biden administration, as well as the relatively recent appointment of a new lead defense lawyer for bin Attash.</p> <p>The defense team said the prosecution had "suggested that a response to the Policy Principles from other government actors and agencies can be expected around the end of calendar year 2022 or beginning of calendar year 2023."</p> <p>The prosecution's response to the defense motion to cancel the pretrial hearings for early 2023 was filed in mid-December 2022, but what the prosecution said about the negotiations is not entirely known because the filing is "currently undergoing a security review."</p> <p>Air Force Col. Matthew McCall, the presiding judge in the 9/11 case, said in late December 2022 that KSM's defense team had joined in the request to cancel the early 2023 hearings.</p> <p>McCall added that the prosecution had provided the court with its first periodic update on the status of the Biden administration's "policy principles" decision-making and that the prosecution would not oppose</p>

	<p>canceling the hearings in January and February 2023 but that it was holding off on its position on canceling the March 2023 hearings too.</p> <p>Top Republicans have criticized any deal that would take the death penalty off the table.</p> <p>“Joe Biden’s allies are negotiating lesser sentences for 9/11 attackers,” Rep. Jim Jordan (R-OH), the soon-to-be-chairman of the House Judiciary Committee, tweeted at about the 21st anniversary of 9/11. “If they won’t punish terrorists, how can we trust them to lock up criminals in your neighborhood?”</p> <p>Rep. Mike Turner (R-OH), the incoming chairman of the House Intelligence Committee, also criticized any effort to take capital punishment off the table for Mohammed and his co-defendants.</p> <p>“Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and his accomplices planned the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks [and are] responsible for the deaths of nearly 3,000 Americans,” Turner told the Washington Examiner last year. “It is unconscionable that military prosecutors would even entertain the idea of a plea agreement that removed the possibility of the death penalty.”</p> <p>“At a bare minimum, we are at least one year away from trial,” McCall had said in September 2021, shortly after taking over the case. That now seems optimistic and likely impossible. A trial may also never happen.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/09 FBI probes terror attack on MGM solar array
SOURCE	https://www.reviewjournal.com/business/casinos-gaming/fbi-joins-investigation-of-terror-attack-on-mgm-mega-solar-array-2709518/
GIST	<p>The FBI has joined the Metropolitan Police Department in investigating what is being considered a terror attack on the MGM Mega Solar Array facility northeast of Las Vegas.</p> <p>The attack resulted in power from the facility being shut down Thursday.</p> <p>“Following an incident at the Mega Solar Array facility, on-site personnel immediately notified authorities and shut down the plant’s operations as a precaution in accordance with industry-standard safety protocols,” Chicago-based array owner and operator Invenergy said in an emailed statement. “No one was injured, and the facility is expected to be fully operational this week.”</p> <p>There was no estimate on how much it would cost to replace damaged components.</p> <p>Mohammed Mesmarian, 34, was arrested in Boulder City and faces felony charges of committing an act of terrorism, escape by a prisoner, and two counts each of arson and destruction of property valued at \$5,000 or more, court records show.</p> <p>He is scheduled to appear in Las Vegas Justice Court on Tuesday morning for a 72-hour hearing.</p> <p>Employees at the power facility called police at 11:37 a.m. on Thursday, to report that a man broke through the fence and set a vehicle on fire. The facility is off U.S. Highway 93, 30 miles northeast of Las Vegas.</p> <p>Court records show that Mesmarian was arrested near Boulder Beach Campground in the Lake Mead National Recreation Area. It is unclear how Mesmarian got to the campground from the array facility.</p> <p>Invenergy owns the solar array and has a 20-year power purchase agreement with MGM. In early 2021, Invenergy sold a 75 percent interest in the array to AEP Renewables, a subsidiary of American Electric Power, one of the nation’s largest electric companies.</p> <p>Invenergy produces 6,085 megawatts on 49 solar projects worldwide.</p>

323,000 solar panels

The Nevada array — a collection of 323,000 panels arranged across 640 acres — provides power equivalent to the amount used by 27,000 average-size U.S. homes annually. MGM Resorts is the sole user of the renewable electricity generated, and the array produces up to 90 percent of MGM Resorts' Las Vegas daytime power needs for 65 million square feet of buildings across 13 properties and more than 36,000 rooms on the Strip.

The 100-megawatt solar array, the hospitality industry's largest directly sourced renewable electricity project worldwide, is a key component of MGM's long-term climate strategy.

MGM had no additional comment on the attack or how it provided power during the time the array was offline.

The FBI, which referred questions to Metro as the lead agency in the case, entered the investigation as the number of attacks on power grid facilities nationwide increased in 2022.

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security issued a national terrorism advisory bulletin in November saying it had joined the FBI in developing awareness on power grid attacks. Most recently, there were attacks on substations on Christmas Day that knocked out power in five states.

'Heightened threat'

"The United States remains in a heightened threat environment," the Homeland Security Nov. 30 bulletin says. "Lone offenders and small groups motivated by a range of ideological beliefs and/or personal grievances continue to pose a persistent and lethal threat to the homeland. Domestic actors and foreign terrorist organizations continue to maintain a visible presence online in attempts to motivate supporters to conduct attacks in the homeland. Threat actors have recently mobilized to violence, citing factors such as reactions to current events and adherence to violent extremist ideologies."

The department said at least 108 human-related incidents were reported during the first eight months of 2022, compared with 99 in all of 2021 and 97 in 2020. More than a dozen cases of vandalism have been reported since September.

Four substations vandalized on Christmas Day in Washington state knocked out power to 14,000 customers.

Substations in Washington and Oregon were attacked at least six times in November and December. Prior to that, other high-profile incidents involving power substations were reported in other states.

On Dec. 3, two substations in Moore County, North Carolina, left tens of thousands of customers without power during a cold snap.

In Maysville, North Carolina, a substation was vandalized on Nov. 11.

Six "intrusion events" were reported at Duke Energy substations in Florida in September.

NV Energy monitors attacks

A spokesperson for NV Energy, which has no role with the MGM Mega Solar Array, said the company is aware of the growing number of attacks on energy facilities.

"We are aware of a recent incident to a solar facility caused by a vehicle impact," NV Energy spokesperson Katie Nannini said on Monday.

"The equipment in question does not belong to NV Energy," she said. "We take the physical and cyber security of our energy equipment very seriously, and we work closely with local, state and federal law enforcement on a regular basis. Recent events impacting energy infrastructure in the United States are top of mind for us as we work to enhance the security of our energy infrastructure. We have and will continue

	<p>to strengthen and enhance our facilities to ensure that our customers are not detrimentally impacted by these types of disruptions.”</p> <p>Nannini said the recent attack on the solar array has not resulted in any special new security measures surrounding its own energy facilities.</p> <p>“We continually invest in security measures at critical infrastructure around the state, both from a cyber as well as physical standpoint,” she said. “Some examples include installing protective barriers and replacing chain-link fences in some instances with heavy brick walls.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/09 Taliban nabbed at Hungary-Serbia border
SOURCE	https://hungarytoday.hu/taliban-terrorists-captured-at-the-hungarian-serbian-border/
GIST	<p>Serbian commandos captured Taliban terrorists near the Hungarian border at the end of December. The two men were wanted on suspicion of terrorism under an international arrest warrant.</p> <p>Two Taliban terrorists on the international wanted list were arrested by Serbian commandos near the Hungarian border, public broadcaster M1 reported.</p> <p>In a large-scale operation, more than 100 migrants claiming to be Syrian and Afghan were arrested, including two terrorists long wanted by French authorities. According to the police, 25 of the migrants were “interesting security-wise,” according to Reuters.</p> <p>Mer Hamza had previously served as a general in the Afghan army, where he was dismissed for his extremist views. His partner is Abdul Bashir, nicknamed the Captain. According to French authorities, he is a sniper who has carried out serial killings of US and French soldiers.</p> <p>The capture of the terrorists was not without danger, as they were armed with live automatic machine guns when they were tackled by the commandos.</p> <p>According to the Serbian defense minister, they were trying to escape to the European Union through Hungary, where they could have organized terrorist groups, which is why they are considered particularly dangerous. The French authorities have already requested their extradition and they could soon be prosecuted on terrorism charges.</p> <p>Meanwhile, migratory pressure continues at the Serbian border.</p> <p>Large numbers of illegal immigrants are gathering, including an increasing number of people with combat experience.</p> <p>György Bakondi, the prime minister’s chief advisor on homeland security, told the news program that illegal migration has become more dangerous and large-scale.</p> <p>Border control not only has an important public security and sovereignty protection function, but also a very important national security function, to keep out those who try to cross the border illegally, either through terrorist acts or other acts or intentions that threaten national security, he warned.</p> <p>Last year, 270,000 migrants were detained at the Hungarian border; this is more than double the number in 2021. Traffickers are also becoming increasingly aggressive in their attempts to smuggle illegal migrants into Europe. Hungarian prisons are holding 2,500 human smugglers from 72 countries.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/10 US airstrikes in Somalia up 30% in 2022
SOURCE	https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/us-airstrikes-somalia-30-percent-2022

GIST	<p>US air strikes in Somalia increased 30 percent in 2022, as the Biden administration increased US involvement in the Horn of Africa country that is experiencing a fresh wave of fighting between the government and al-Shabaab militants.</p> <p>The Pentagon conducted 15 air strikes in 2022 on the al-Qaeda-linked group, according to the Long War Journal tracker. Africom said the strikes killed at least 107 al-Shabaab fighters.</p> <p>The US has conducted military operations against al-Shabaab in Somalia since 2007. Last year, US President Joe Biden reversed a move by the Trump administration to withdraw US troops from the country.</p> <p>The Biden administration's decision came as the African Union began winding down its mission in Somalia, and amid renewed concerns about the threat posed by al-Shabaab.</p> <p>Africom estimates the militant group has 5,000 to 10,000 fighters across the country of 15 million, controlling territory in southern and central Somalia.</p> <p>On Saturday, Somalia's government claimed for the first time that al-Shabaab called for open negotiations with the government, as it conducts a military offensive against the group it described as "total war".</p> <p>The uptick in fighting between al-Shabaab and government forces has come as the country experiences a fresh wave of attacks. Al-Shabaab claimed responsibility for a twin suicide car bombing in Somalia's Hiran region on Wednesday that killed at least 10 people.</p> <p>Last year was a particularly bloody one. More than 100 people died in October when two car bombs exploded in a busy Mogadishu intersection. In August, al-Shabaab launched a days-long siege on a Mogadishu hotel that left more than 20 people dead.</p> <p>Theatre for regional competition</p> <p>Some US lawmakers have raised concerns about the US military campaign in Somalia, which has been carried out on the grounds of the 2001 Authorization for the Use of Military Force (AUMF), passed following the 9/11 terror attacks.</p> <p>Successive US administrations have used the AUMF to approve military action in countries like Afghanistan, Yemen, and Djibouti, despite no formal declaration of war by Congress.</p> <p>In December, Democratic Congresswoman Sara Jacobs and Senator Elizabeth Warren sent a letter to the Pentagon arguing that the Defence Department was undercounting civilian casualties in Somalia, compared to human rights groups and NGOs.</p> <p>Somalia, which has been wracked by political crisis and infighting for decades, has also become a theatre of competition for regional actors.</p> <p>Turkey has trained thousands of Somali government forces over the last decade and has its biggest overseas military base in Mogadishu. Analysts say Qatar and the UAE are also active in the country, training and recruiting their own fighters.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/09 German police hunt ricin terror plot clues
SOURCE	https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/europe/2023/01/09/german-police-hunt-ricin-terror-plot-clues-after-iranian-brothers-arrested/
GIST	<p>German counter-terrorism police were hunting for a possible chemical weapons stash on Monday after two Iranian brothers were accused of plotting an attack.</p> <p>A special police unit searched two garages belonging to one of the suspects early on Monday.</p>

It came after a search of his house failed to find traces of the ricin or cyanide he had allegedly procured.

The suspect, 32, and his brother, 25, were arrested early on Sunday after a tip-off from a foreign intelligence agency, believed to be the American FBI.

Prosecutors were alarmed sufficiently to arrange a raid that very night in Castrop-Rauxel, western Germany.

In a statement to *The National*, prosecutor Holger Heming said the brothers were accused of planning an attack "motivated by Islamism" that would kill an unknown number of people.

The charge of conspiracy to murder could carry a prison sentence of three to 15 years if they are found guilty, he said.

German Interior Minister Nancy Faeser said the country was still a terrorist target despite [ISIS](#) supporters shrinking in number.

Police were examining how close the brothers had been to executing the alleged plot, as a judge ordered them to be held in custody.

The two men were identified only as Iranian nationals M.J. and J.J.

Herbert Reul, interior minister of the state of North Rhine-Westphalia, said they could be the latest example of lone-wolf plotters planning an attack without an elaborate terrorist network behind them.

"The number of dangerous people has got a little bit smaller but the abstract danger remains high. It can happen at any time," he told German television on Monday.

The home searched early on Sunday was not contaminated but electronic media was seized.

The garages were searched on Monday after the link to one of the suspects was discovered.

A Tunisian couple received long prison terms in a similar case in 2020, in which they were found guilty of plotting a deadly ricin attack.

The substance derived from castor beans is a highly toxic biological agent that can kill anyone who inhales it.

Although there are no known cases of a mass ricin attack, there have long been concerns about its use by terrorist groups.

Ms Faeser said 21 attacks by Islamic extremists had been prevented in Germany since the turn of the century.

The tip-off from abroad led to some criticism that Germany had failed to identify the potential threat, and suggestions that the prospect of extremist plots was being ignored.

A [suspected right-wing coup plot](#) uncovered last month turned the attention of authorities to Germany's far-right scene.

Mr Reul said co-operation with foreign intelligence was positive but German authorities lacked the power to go further.

"The important thing is that you know early who is planning what and who they might be in contact with," he said.

About 28,000 people in Germany are thought to have sympathies with Islamist terrorism, 2,000 of whom are considered potentially violent.

Germany's worst such attack came in 2016 when an ISIS supporter killed 13 people by [driving a lorry into a Christmas market in Berlin](#).

Another ISIS sympathiser stabbed two people, killing one, in Dresden in 2020.

Ms Faeser on Monday said Germany would show "zero tolerance" to any enemies of the democratic state.

"Anyone who wants to take up arms against our democracy must know that our state will defend itself with all its strength," she said.

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HEADLINE	01/10 Suspected extremist attack east DR Congo
SOURCE	https://www.newagebd.net/article/191313/24-people-killed-in-suspected-extremist-attack-in-east-dr-congo
GIST	<p>Suspected CODECO extremists killed at least 24 civilians over the weekend in several villages of eastern DR Congo's troubled Ituri province, local civilian sources said Monday.</p> <p>The attacks occurred early Sunday afternoon in Djugu territory, according to Charite Banza, a civil society leader in the area.</p> <p>He said CODECO fighters torched houses in three separate villages and killed 24 people, updating an earlier toll of 16 dead after more bodies were discovered.</p> <p>'We found more bodies in Jisa, Largu and Blukwa,' in the north of the territory, Banza explained.</p> <p>'Other villages remain inaccessible,' he said, and the toll could go up again.</p> <p>'It's terrible. We are dying like animals.'</p> <p>Many people had fled from their homes, Banza said.</p> <p>A humanitarian worker in the area, who declined to be named, had also earlier said 16 bodies had been discovered in the wake of the raids.</p> <p>However, the Congolese army spokesman in Ituri, Lieutenant Jules Ngongo, reported that four civilians had been killed in Sunday's raids, as well as one soldier and two extremists.</p> <p>AFP was unable to independently confirm the death toll.</p> <p>Local human rights activist Desire Mbutchu told AFP that CODECO fighters launched the attack on the rival Zaire militia on Sunday allegedly in revenge for the killing of a teacher from the Lendu community.</p> <p>The Lendu and Hema communities have a longstanding feud that led to thousands of deaths between 1999 and 2003 before an intervention by a European peacekeeping force.</p> <p>Violence resumed in 2017, blamed on the emergence of the CODECO militia, which claims to represent the Lendu.</p> <p>The Zaire militia says it represents the Hema community.</p> <p>'We ask the Zaire group to stop the provocations, CODECO militiamen to respect the Nairobi peace process and the authorities to post soldiers in Hema and Lendu villages' to protect people, Mbutchu told AFP.</p>

	Representatives of CODECO (Cooperative for the Development of the Congo) attended recent peace talks in Kenya with several dozen armed groups operating in eastern Democratic Republic of Congo. Zaire militia members declined an invitation to participate.
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HEADLINE	01/09 Fear: extremists targeting power grid
SOURCE	https://time.com/6244977/us-power-grid-attacks-extremism/
GIST	<p>A string of mysterious attacks on power stations across the U.S. has rekindled fears about the vulnerabilities of America's electricity infrastructure, which security officials have warned presents a growing target to extremists and saboteurs.</p> <p>Attacks and suspicious activity at U.S. power stations reached a decade-long high last year, with more than 100 reported incidents in the first eight months of 2022, according to a TIME review of the Department of Energy's most recent data, which runs through August. Since then, there have been at least 18 more publicly reported attacks or potential attacks on substations and power plants in Florida, North Carolina, Oregon, South Carolina, and Washington.</p> <p>The tally includes at least half a dozen at Duke Energy facilities in Florida and at least six others on electrical substations in the Pacific Northwest in November and December. In one attack on Thanksgiving, two intruders cut through the fencing around a substation in Clackamas County, Ore., and "used firearms to shoot up and disable numerous pieces of equipment and cause significant damage," according to an incident report. And in the most high-profile incident, intruders breached the gates and opened fire on two Duke Energy substations in Moore County, N.C., in early December, damaging equipment in what local authorities called a "targeted" attack that cut off the power for more than 45,000 people.</p> <p>It's not clear who's behind all this. But the surge has alarmed federal officials and security analysts, who warned last year of "credible, specific plans" by violent domestic groups to attack the power grid. Violent conspiracies focused on targeting and destroying energy infrastructure have become one of the top themes on extremist social-media platforms and messaging apps. In each of the last three years, law enforcement has foiled plots by right-wing extremists designed to sow chaos by attacking America's electrical infrastructure.</p> <p>Now, officials say, the rise in incidents suggests the perpetrators may be drawing inspiration from one another, fine-tuning strategies to pursue potentially more damaging copycat attacks. Each incident—and each suspect that escapes undetected—further emboldens a determined cadre of criminals and highlights the U.S. power grid as a target.</p> <p>"Domestic terror groups understand that citizens losing power from gunfire or sabotage is an easy way to receive media attention, which they crave," says Brian Harrell, a former Assistant Secretary for Infrastructure Protection at the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS), who tells TIME he expects a significant increase in attacks on U.S. energy infrastructure in 2023. "The utility sector has a real problem on its hands. Power stations are an attractive target, and domestic terror groups know that destroying this infrastructure can have a crippling effect."</p> <p>The motives and methods of the recent attacks vary. Some of the perpetrators may have been seeking money, not mayhem. Federal authorities say that the attacks on four substations in western Washington State on Christmas Day, which left more than 14,000 residents in the dark, were perpetrated by two men seeking to knock out power so they could commit a robbery.</p> <p>Yet many others remain mysterious to law enforcement and federal regulators. The case that most concerns authorities is the Dec. 3 attack on two power stations in Moore County, N.C. A month later, despite an ongoing FBI investigation continues, no one has been arrested for acts of sabotage that left more than 45,000 people without power amid frigid temperatures. Law enforcement officials, who have offered up to \$75,000 for anyone who can provide information that would lead to the arrest of those</p>

responsible, have said that the perpetrators took aim at the substations with firearms with the intention to cause widespread outages.

Several experts and former officials told TIME they believed that attack was committed by someone who knew what they were doing. “I’m certain that the North Carolina attackers have insider knowledge on substations and critical energy infrastructure and knew how to attack, undetected,” says Harrell, noting they knew where to access sites and what to shoot at—and that no security would be in place.

Jon Wellinghoff, who served as chairman of the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) from 2009 to 2013, says the incident in Moore County was the most sophisticated he had seen since a 2013 attack on the Pacific Gas and Electric Company’s substation near San Jose, Calif., in which multiple gunmen fired on the facility and caused \$15 million in damages. No one was ever arrested in that case.

Whoever perpetrated the attack in North Carolina “were fairly sophisticated,” Wellinghoff says. “They wanted to knock out a particular area of that county...and were able to select the substation that would knock out that entire line.”

The effectiveness of the attack in Moore County is likely to lead more bad actors or extremist groups to “learn more information about the infrastructure itself and how it operates” online in order to carry out similar attacks, Wellinghoff adds. “You have the ability now to look at selected areas of the country and knock those out depending on how they are interconnected, and that information of where those lines and those substations are is all available to anybody on the Internet.”

That makes the U.S. power grid—which spans more than 7,300 power plants, 55,000 transmission substations and 160,000 miles of high-voltage power lines—a particularly soft target for determined attackers. “It’s inherently vulnerable, because it’s constructed in such a way that if one part of it can be destroyed or impaired it can have a very significant impact on other larger parts of it very quickly,” says Dr. Granger Morgan, a professor of engineering at Carnegie Mellon University who chaired three National Academy of Sciences reports on the power grid for the federal government. “Kind of like dominoes.”

Saboteurs have been taking aim at this infrastructure for decades. In some parts of the country, for instance, hunting season has always brought an uptick in troublemakers taking potshots at insulators and other equipment. But the attacks like the ones on the North Carolina substations are “a different ballgame,” FERC Commissioner Mark Christie said at the agency’s December meeting, calling them “sophisticated.”

Morgan has also noticed a shift in recent incidents. “These increasing attacks on things like large transformers and circuit breakers are significantly more troubling,” he says, raising concerns of a “copycat effect” which could eventually lead to a more coordinated attack by perpetrators with the knowledge to cause significant damage. “Many of these [power stations] are only blocked off by chain-link fences in the middle of nowhere,” he says, often without personnel guarding them.

An analysis by the FERC [reported by](#) the Wall Street Journal in 2014 found that the U.S. could suffer a blackout across the country for weeks or months if saboteurs simultaneously targeted just nine of the 55,000 substations, threatening the collapse of the entire network. Natural events have previously highlighted this vulnerability. In 2003, tree branches touching power lines in Ohio created a cascading effect that ended in the most widespread blackout in North American history.

Authorities have said little about the culprits behind the surge in attacks. But officials have suggested they are worried about coordination between more nefarious actors. “Is there something more sinister going on? Are people trying to take part of the grid out and have people lose power on purpose? And for what reason?” Richard Glick, who chaired the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission (FERC) until Jan. 3, said at a press briefing in December. “I don’t think anyone knows that right now. But there’s no doubt that the numbers are up in terms of reported incidents.”

While there are no public indications that the attacks have been perpetrated by people motivated by extremist groups or ideologies, violent conspiracies and manifestos focused on targeting and destroying energy infrastructure in order to cause fear and chaos have been widely shared on extremist social-media platforms and messaging apps. Law enforcement has foiled several plots inspired by these narratives in recent years. In May 2020, three men claiming to be members of the far-right “Boogaloo” movement were arrested for allegedly conspiring to “firebomb” power substations in Las Vegas to provoke violence during Black Lives Matter protests in the city. The three men, who had military backgrounds, have pleaded not guilty to federal conspiracy charges and still remain in custody awaiting trial in both state and federal courts.

In August 2021, four neo-Nazis in North Carolina were charged with a conspiracy in which they intended to take down a critical substation with firearms and explosives, [according to](#) prosecutors. The group, which met on a neo-Nazi accelerationist forum and included two former U.S. Marines, “discussed their plans to take out the power grid” and assembled a list of a dozen targets. They discussed targeting energy infrastructure “for the purpose of creating general chaos and to provide cover and ease of escape in those areas in which they planned to undertake assassinations and other desired operations to further their goal of creating a white ethno-state,” according to the government. Two of the men have pleaded guilty and agreed to cooperate with the government while others await trial.

In Feb. 2022, three avowed white supremacists pleaded guilty in Ohio to terrorism-related charges for a similar plot to knock out parts of the U.S. power grid, in what prosecutors described as an attempt to cause panic and chaos to start a “race war.” The group “wanted to attack regional power substations and expected the damage would lead to economic distress and civil unrest,” Timothy Langan, the assistant director of the FBI’s Counterterrorism Division, said in a statement.

A DHS intelligence memo last year warned of “credible, specific plans” by domestic violent extremists “adhering to a range of ideologies” who would “continue to plot and encourage physical attacks against electrical infrastructure.” Officials said extremists were encouraging attacks on the power grid on encrypted messaging apps and other platforms, making suspicious activity difficult to detect. They also noted that extremists seemed to reference the 2013 attack in California, which is widely cited by some extremist groups as a model of how to cause widespread disruption and get away. At the same time, a 14-page handbook circulated on accelerationist channels on Telegram called for followers to “strike a blow to this system” by damaging electricity infrastructure to “spark revolution and chaos.”

After the Moore County attack in December, federal regulators ordered a review of the physical security of electrical facilities. But experts say the aging state of the nation’s electricity infrastructure, a patchwork of public and private ownership, and the overlapping federal, state and local regulations will continue to make many substations easy targets. And even as authorities work to tighten the security of these facilities, they sound resigned to the attacks continuing.

“A determined adversary with insider knowledge as to what to shoot, and how to cripple key components, is difficult to stop,” says Harrell, the former DHS official. “If the attackers stay underground, don’t highlight themselves, and don’t get caught, they preserve their ability to attack again.”

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HEADLINE	01/09 Intersections: policing, violent extremism
SOURCE	https://www.hstoday.us/featured/perspective-four-intersections-between-policing-and-violent-extremism-that-cannot-be-ignored/
GIST	In recent years media articles and reports on police involvement in violent extremist groups, particularly far-right and white supremacist groups, have been released on a monthly or even weekly basis. These include reports on active and retired police who participated in the January 6 Capitol riot , on active and retired police whose names appeared on leaked membership rolls of the Oath Keepers militia , and on widespread incidents of police brutality against members of minority groups, especially Black people, and subsequent police responses to protests against the same. The articles receiving the most attention tend to paint a picture of police being recruited to join violent extremist groups, to whom they then

provide weapons, training, and advice. This is indeed worrisome, but it appears to involve relatively few numbers of officers. A wider look at the varying intersections between policing and violent extremism reveals that the problem is more complex than it may seem. The [International Center for the Study of Violent Extremism](#) [ICSVE] [analyzed a set of articles and reports](#) that mentioned both policing and violent extremism published between 2017 and 2022, finding four major ways that police and violent extremism, particularly white supremacist and far-right violent extremism, intersect.

1. Law Enforcement Joining and Training Violent Extremists

The first way that policing and violent extremism intersect is the simplest and most highly covered. Articles abound about the hack and leak of Oath Keepers membership, with the [Anti-Defamation League](#) [ADL] identifying nearly 400 active members of law enforcement, including police and sheriff's deputies, as well as other types of law enforcement such as Border Patrol. Although most of these individuals did not publicize their membership in the group, they typically touted their law enforcement experience on their applications, with some even promising to recruit their colleagues. In Orange County, [a sheriff's deputy was investigated](#) after wearing an Oath Keepers patch while on duty at a Black Lives Matter protest. There have also been instances of police officers joining the [Ku Klux Klan](#) [KKK], [the Proud Boys](#), and [Identity Evropa](#), among others.

There are many reasons why active and retired law enforcement may be attracted to far-right violent extremist groups, beyond surface-level ideological alignment, which rarely paints a full picture of radicalization to violent extremism. Violent extremist groups offer these individuals, particularly veteran law enforcement officers (as well as military veterans), a sense of camaraderie, structure, and identity that they may be missing, as well as the opportunity to fight for what is claimed to be a noble cause. Often these motivations are the same reasons why people choose careers in law enforcement in the first place! For police, reform measures such as bans on chokeholds and efforts to end qualified immunity may be perceived as efforts to curtail the power of police and empower far-left forces. In the latter case, these same individuals are susceptible to claims by violent extremist groups that the only way to protect America from the insidious forces seeking to destroy it is to align with extremists in their claimed efforts to defend democracy and American values, preserve gun rights, stop illegal immigration, keep America white, etc.

2. Violent Extremists Joining and Training Law Enforcement

The intersections between policing and violent extremism are multidirectional. Violent extremist groups certainly make efforts to recruit police into their ranks, but they have also [sought to join police forces and sheriff's departments](#) themselves in order to gain training and intelligence, to ingratiate themselves with law enforcement, and to position themselves in places of power especially as they anticipate impending racial holy war or the collapse of society and its remaking according to their extremist vision. It also appears that violent extremists have been relatively successful at conveying their ideology and goals to law enforcement en masse as police trainers. In May 2022, [Reuters](#) identified five individuals with ties to the Oath Keepers, Three Percenters, Proud Boys, Boogaloo Bois, and the Q-Anon conspiracy theory who are regularly hired to train police officers nationwide. Together, these individuals have trained hundreds if not thousands of police officers. Among them, one man alone, who was briefly banned from advertising on a Washington State training commission website due to complaints about racism and misogyny espoused during his trainings, trained 560 officers in 12 states between 2018 and 2022. These extremist trainers also espouse the "[Constitutional Sheriff](#)" philosophy, which promotes the idea that sheriffs should enforce only the laws they view as constitutional. In addition to concerns that arise surrounding the messages that these trainers convey to law enforcement nationwide, it is also troubling that police leadership and sheriffs, who may not explicitly adhere to or endorse violent extremist ideologies, are nevertheless so attracted to these messages that they are willing to pay for these extremist individuals to train their forces.

Indeed, these extremist trainers' messages are highly psychologically appealing. First, they are validating to the reasons many entered the police force – desiring a sense of “noble” purpose, feeling of being a guardian of society, and being on the side of right and good. In contrast to implicit bias trainings, which police may perceive as telling them that they are racist for perceiving members of minority groups as threats, extremist trainers tell police that they are right to perceive these individuals

as threats and that they need to be vigilant to the dangers posed to them by minority community members. Second, these trainings promote a sense of unique purpose and personal significance important to every career professional, but in this case with a racist spin. They reinforce to police the idea that they comprise the “[thin blue line](#)” between order and chaos, that they alone are what keeps society from disintegrating into anarchy. Thus, it makes sense that law enforcement leaders and officers alike would prefer trainings that build their self-esteem and reinforce their worldview than those that do the opposite.

3. Violent Extremists’ Perception of Law Enforcement as Supportive of Their Cause

The intersection between police and violent extremists extends beyond membership in extremist groups and provision of training. Notably, anti-government militias are frequently included under the broader umbrella of far-right violent extremist groups, and these are typically wary of any institutional authorities, but other far-right violent extremist groups often view themselves as on the side of institutions. Violent nationalist or fascist groups, for example, perceive themselves as hyper-patriotic. Baked into their ideologies is the idea that their nation, in this case the United States, is under attack by forces that seek to destroy it. Their actions, whether anti-immigrant, antisemitic, anti-Muslim, anti-LGBTQ, or anti-Black, are therefore framed as protective, not destructive, and as aligned with the police. Hence, the perception of support from police is often enough for violent extremist groups to proclaim their legitimacy and patriotic bona fides. These perceptions are reinforced by police behaviors such as cooperating with far-right counter-protesters during Black Lives Matter protests in [Kenosha, Wisconsin](#), assisting January 6 rioters [during](#) and [after](#) the riot, and exchanging texts with members of Patriot Prayer as they prepared for violent fights with left-wing protesters in [Portland, Oregon](#). In cases when police act contrary to the beliefs of far-right violent extremists, as the vast majority of Capitol Police did when they protected Congress on January 6, they are held up by extremists as evidence of anti-American conspiracies.

4. Law Enforcement’s Perception of Violent Extremists as Non-Threatening Allies

Alas, the perception by violent extremists that police are on their side is not always wrong. Indeed, [a survey of over 500 sheriffs](#) found that nearly half of the respondents agreed with the constitutional sheriff ideology that their power superseded that of the federal government in areas under their jurisdiction. In the same vein, approximately one-third of the respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that “the traditional American way of life is disappearing so fast that we may have to use force to save it.” Additionally, 11 percent of the survey respondents said that they supported or strongly supported the Oath Keepers in particular. Perhaps consistent with an apparent perception that far-right violent extremist groups did not pose a threat, over half of the survey respondents stated that the far-left movement Antifa was responsible for the violence on January 6, a clearly disproven claim. [Other research](#) has found that police systematically and disproportionately focus their intelligence collection and arrests on left-wing protesters (including in the lead-up to [January 6](#)), despite [continued assessments](#) that the primary domestic violent extremist threat in the United States comes from far-right groups.

When violent extremists perceive law enforcement as allies, it is sometimes due to overt police actions, but it is also innate in their ideologies. When police perceive violent extremists as non-threatening or even as allies, it is sometimes due to the overt actions and statements of violent extremists, but sometimes in spite of them. Violent extremists make great efforts to present themselves as on the side of police, whether in their social media posts of “Blue Lives Matter” or in their offerings of assistance during Black Lives Matter protests. Like the extremist trainers described previously, violent extremist groups’ propaganda aims to build up the self-esteem of police by framing them as critical to the continuation of the country, and validates their fears by depicting “the other,” usually Black people and undocumented immigrants, as dangerous. In some cases, law enforcement has been actively “aided” by violent extremists, such as members of [militia groups on the Southern border](#). Violent extremist groups’ actions, particularly on January 6, belie their pro-police façade; they are only supportive of police whom they believe are supportive of them – all others are viewed as traitors to the cause.

What Can Be Done to Counter These Intersections Between Policing and Violent Extremism?

The line connecting all four forms of intersection described above is the complementary psychosocial characteristics of both law enforcement and these violent extremist groups, making it harder for police to realize the dangers of and distance themselves from such groups and ideologies. The cycle of far-right violent extremist groups portraying themselves as patriotic, police joining groups they perceive as patriotic, and far-right violent extremist groups holding up police in their ranks as evidence of their patriotism is complemented by perceptions by some police that far-right violent extremists are non-threatening and supportive, leading to implicit or explicit support for these groups by police, reinforcing violent extremists' perception that the police are on their side.

With these characteristics in mind, several conclusions can be drawn. First, reforms to policing and more stringent regulations aimed at reducing incidents of police brutality may be interpreted as efforts to subvert their authority and prevent them from successfully doing the job they view as patriotic and carrying out a noble purpose, and trainers and policymakers should consider highlighting how these reforms better enable police to protect themselves and their communities. Surely, patriotic police wanting to act heroically for their communities is something to be encouraged. Second, police should receive training aimed at inoculating them against the false claims of patriotism and pro-police sentiment voiced by far-right violent extremism and alerting them to the threat that these groups pose to the communities the police are charged with serving and protecting. Third, given the importance of data, specifically regarding arrests and convictions, to increasing police department funding, incorporating a requirement for prosecutors to scour social media of police members would provide an incentive for departments to weed out violent extremists who could pose a risk to conviction rates.

Similarly, documenting hate crime arrests and convictions is important and should be emphasized as a measure of police success. Likewise, police should be encouraged to also do social media searches and background interviews of potential recruits to avoid taking them into their ranks.

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HEADLINE	01/09 Jihadist terror groups attacks not abating
SOURCE	https://www.hstoday.us/featured/are-al-qaedas-2022-activities-a-harbinger-of-the-terror-groups-resurgence/
GIST	<p>Attacks by jihadist terrorist groups continued in 2022 and showed no signs of abating. ISIS-Core in Syria and Iraq and its affiliates in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa have threatened regional security and proved that they would constantly menace global security in 2023. Correspondingly, Al Qaeda-affiliated groups also have been active in regions and perpetrated hundreds of terrorist attacks in conflict zones such as in Syria and Yemen, the Sahel region such as in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger and its nearby countries in Togo and Benin, and the Horn of Africa such as in Somalia, Kenya, and Ethiopia. As opposed to ISIS-Core, which has been actively involved in terrorist attacks, Al Qaeda-Core has maintained its strategy of operating through its localized groups in these countries. Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in Syria, Al-Qaeda in Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) in Yemen, Jama'at Nasr al-Islam wal Muslimin (JNIM) in the Sahel region, and Al-Shabaab in Somalia have continued to convene local jihadist groups under their flags.</p> <p>Additionally, Al Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) solidified its presence in Afghanistan and India and threatened regional security, taking advantage of the Taliban's takeover that presented opportunities for Al Qaeda to operate and harbor in Afghanistan.</p> <p>In Afghanistan, the Taliban's takeover has heated debate over whether Al Qaeda would use Afghanistan as a safe haven country. Nonetheless, the killing of Al Qaeda's leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, in an over-the-horizon operation in downtown Kabul on July 31, 2022, did not live up to expectations and pointed to the close relationship between the Taliban government and Al Qaeda. The Haqqani Network Group, an Al-Qaeda-affiliated organization, has already been embedded in the Taliban government, and its leader has been the Minister of Interior, making Afghanistan one of the safe havens of Al Qaeda. AQIS has embedded in Taliban ranks and settled in Afghanistan with its estimated 200-400 fighters. The organization also published an English and Urdu statement and called for attacks targeting the Indian governing party on June 7, 2022. The United States government designated three other AQIS leaders as terrorists on December 1, 2022, underlining that AQIS is one of the jihadist groups that operate in Afghanistan.</p>

In the conflict zones, Al Qaeda-affiliated groups continued to do attacks in Syria and Yemen. HTS has been the perpetrator of hundreds of attacks yearly and targets Syrian regime forces, international military, and Kurdish groups. The group continued to control territory and [set itself up](#) as the civic authority in areas including the province of Idlib. HTS was able to enter Afrin city and [occupied](#) northern Aleppo province on October 11, 2022. Five regime soldiers lost their lives in another HTS [attack](#) on November 7, 2022. In Yemen, AQAP was one of the most active groups in 2015 and 2016 and the perpetrator of hundred of attacks; however, the group lost its capacity over the years and was able to conduct 29 attacks in [2018](#), 16 attacks in [2019](#), and 30 attacks in [2020](#). However, Yemen [experienced](#) the resurgence of the organization that targeted Southern Transition Council (STC)-affiliated Security Belt forces and killed 20 STC fighters in Ahwar on September 6, 2022, and then launched its operation to target STC-affiliated forces on September 13, 2022.

Africa deserves specific attention regarding spreading Al Qaeda's influence and presence in Somalia, the Sahel and its neighboring countries, and Nigeria. New trends have underlined the geographic expansion of Al Qaeda attacks in Africa.

In the Horn of Africa, Al Shabaab is the most active and powerful Al Qaeda group. The group is the product of a failed state in Somalia where local Sharia courts have evolved into a terrorist organization capable of controlling territory, acting like a de facto state, and targeting state institutions with complex coordinated terrorist attacks. The organization [collects](#) taxes, rules out court cases, and patrols streets.

Today the group, deeply embedded in Somalian society, is resilient and resourceful in adjusting to counter-insurgency campaigns. The elections in May 2022 changed the government, and the selection of Hassan Sheikh Mohamud ended a bitter election period but has failed to impact Al Shabaab's capacity severely. The group continued its deadly attacks after the elections. For example, a suicide bombing [attack](#) targeting a military base in Mogadishu killed one soldier and injured six others on September 2022. The group was the [perpetrator](#) of bombing attacks targeting the Education Ministry on October 29, 2022, in Mogadishu, which killed 121 people and injured more than 300 others. Al Shabaab did not stop its deadly suicide attacks in the following days and [conducted](#) another one on November 27, 2022, targeting an international hotel in Mogadishu. In addition to its highly complex attacks in Somalia, Al Shabaab has made attacks in Kenya. After [issuing](#) a new threat and saying that Al Shabaab would continue its attacks in Kenya in late August 2022, the group was the perpetrator of [abducting](#) four Kenyans in November and [targeted](#) the Northern Frontier District killing two people in December 2022.

Furthermore, the group expanded its influence in nearby countries and conducted attacks in Ethiopia. Aiming to benefit from security vacuums left by the Ethiopian government that struggled with unrest at home since the Tigray conflict in late 2020, Al Shabaab began to train ethnic Somalis and Oromos in 2021. Hundreds of its militants crossed the border in eastern Ethiopia and [claimed](#) responsibility for killing dozens of Ethiopian soldiers on April 2022. As a result, its militants retreated, but the group remains active in the border region. Emboldened by its previous successful attacks in the region, Al Shabaab [launched](#) a multi-day invasion in July 2022 and succeeded in evading Ethiopian forces and briefly took control over Hulhul, a town inside Ethiopia.

In the Sahel region, jihadist attacks draw the most significant attention. ISIS-Greater Sahara, ISIS's regional branch, and Al Qaeda's JNIM groups have been active in Mali, Niger, and Burkina Faso. JNIM, a merger of four jihadist groups in the Sahel – Ansar Dine, Katibat Macina, al-Mourabitoun, and the Sahara branch of al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb (AQIM) – was formed in 2017 and waged a campaign of violence targeting civilians, local security forces, UN peacekeepers, and international militaries. The group [uses](#) pastoralist populism, a strategy based on operationalizing the conflicts and benefiting from ethnic divisions, and controls territory in central Mali. The international military, local security forces, and ISIS-GS branch targeted JNIM in the Sahel countries in 2022, but the group has remained the most active and deadliest actor across the Sahel. Since the withdrawal of French forces in October 2021, JNIM [targeted](#) UN peacekeeping missions in more than 50 attacks. In addition, JNIM has expanded its influence and has been involved in attacks in Togo and Benin. Its first attacks were recorded in 2021, but the group targeted the military in these countries in 2022. For example, JNIM [attacked](#) a military outpost

and killed 17 soldiers in Togo in November 2022. On the same day, the terrorist group conducted two attacks in Benin and wounded one soldier.

In Nigeria, Ansaru is another Al Qaeda-affiliated group. The organization was formed in 2012 by Boko Haram's former militants and had a high representation of the perpetrators of terrorist attacks in the following years. However, the group faded into obscurity and lost its power starting in 2015. Claiming that the group defends the interests of Islam in the regions where the group operates, Ansaru's [comeback](#) has taken place in Nigeria's North-West and North-Central zones, recording the soaring numbers of banditry violence against civilians and government forces. Ansaru has provided weapons and other support to bandits. Kidnapping in the region has been vital for the organization to sustain and expand its activities.

Al Qaeda attacks in 2022 show that Al Qaeda is still a resilient organization. The group adjusts its strategies in its regions based on how the organization can get recruits to sustain and expand its global influence. Al Qaeda-affiliated groups capitalize on conditions related to Muslim grievances and weak government responses in Africa. Muslim communities in the Sahel, which feel discriminated against by other ethnic groups, tend to join JNIM to respond to their "enemy" groups. It is the weak government response and providing logistics to banditry groups in northwestern Nigeria where Ansaru takes advantage of operating. Leaving these Al Qaeda groups to operate freely in Africa worsens the situation, and they opportunistically aim to expand their activities in neighboring countries. International military involvement seems to be an effective solution to train local forces, provide resources, and take a leading role in operations.

Since the September 11, 2001, attacks, effective western counterterrorism efforts against Al Qaeda have pushed the organization to adjust its strategies and resulted in delegating central leadership. In this period, Al Qaeda has decentralized and allowed its regional affiliates to operate independently to tailor their strategy based on country- and regional-level developments. Nevertheless, the organization's global activities, successful attacks across the globe, and expansion, particularly in Africa, show that Al Qaeda will compete again with ISIS to be the leader of global jihadism, threaten regional security, and maintain its status as a threatening terrorist organization in the following years.

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HEADLINE	01/10 Taliban hard-liners crackdown on women
SOURCE	https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2023/01/10/taliban-hardliners-women-work-universities/
GIST	<p>ISLAMABAD, Pakistan — Taliban hard-liners are consolidating their control over Afghanistan with the recent bans on women's education and work, overriding the wishes of some Taliban officials in the capital, Kabul, and at the provincial level, according to government and aid officials.</p> <p>The Taliban's supreme leader, Haibatullah Akhundzada, and his fellow ultraconservatives based in Afghanistan's second city of Kandahar are cracking down on social freedoms as their movement transitions from primarily waging an insurgency to governing a large, diverse country.</p> <p>The draconian restrictions issued by Akhundzada last month, banning women from attending universities and from working for international organizations, demonstrated that real authority continues to reside in Kandahar rather than in Kabul, home to Taliban ministries and the group's acting prime minister.</p> <p>"This is [the supreme leader] taking more control" over national policy and how his directives are followed in Kabul and elsewhere, said an aid official in Kabul with direct knowledge of negotiations within Taliban leadership. The official, like others interviewed for this article, spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to discuss ongoing negotiations or internal policy disagreements.</p> <p>Akhundzada, an ultraconservative Muslim cleric, has led the Taliban since 2016, rarely appearing in public but increasingly meeting in private with local religious officials. Despite having appointed Taliban ministers and governors after the collapse of Afghanistan's previous government in 2021, Akhundzada retains the final say on all major national policy decisions.</p>

“At first, we were just sent guidelines” from the supreme leader for formulating policy, said one Taliban official in Kabul at the ministry level. “Now for anything important, we need to get Kandahar’s approval,” he said.

In other cases, rulings come directly from Kandahar without consultation with Kabul, though the decisions are formally announced by government ministries, he said.

“Not everyone agrees” with the recent rulings, the official said, referring to Taliban members in Kabul and at the provincial level. But Kandahar is demanding more oversight of policy, and ministers who lack a direct line to Kandahar are increasingly sidelined, he said. Two other Taliban officials confirmed his description of the recent shifts in the group’s policymaking.

The acting education minister was ousted in September after Akhundzada replaced him with the head of Kandahar’s provincial council as part of a wider reshuffle. The reshuffle also saw Taliban members from the supreme leader’s inner circle appointed to senior political and security positions at the provincial level.

Qari Muhammad Yousef Ahmadi, a deputy Taliban spokesman, denied any shift in the group’s policymaking or implementation.

“The leaders, ministers and members of the cabinet of the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan make policies under the guidance” of the supreme leader, and his guidance is entirely based on Islamic law, Ahmadi said.

The recent rulings appeal to many members of the Taliban’s base, but they also threaten to expose critical divisions within the movement and test its ability to maintain unity.

For years, while at war with U.S. and NATO forces, the Taliban maintained a degree of diversity within its network of alliances. The movement’s more conservative wing is largely dominant in Afghanistan’s mostly rural Pashtun south, but commanders in the east and north were granted some autonomy in how they carried out the Taliban’s strict interpretation of Islamic law. In some districts under Taliban control, for instance, women were allowed to travel to nearby cities to attend university.

With the war over, it’s unclear whether the group is prepared to allow a similar level of autonomy within its leadership. While some cabinet members in Kabul and Taliban leaders at the provincial level disagree with the recent restrictions on the rights of women, these figures have not publicly voiced their dissent, fearing it would be interpreted as an affront to Islamic rule and undermine national unity, according to two Taliban officials in Kabul.

Some Taliban officials have suggested that rulings restricting women’s education and ability to work are temporary and could be adjusted once stricter gender segregation is introduced and if conservative dress is observed. But other officials have come out in strong support of the decrees.

The acting minister of higher education, speaking on Afghan television, accused women in universities of failing to observe a strict Islamic dress code and instead wearing clothing “women wear to go to a wedding.” And a Taliban spokesman in Qatar said that Afghan women do not need to work and that “if the international community wants to help women, they should deliver it to their husbands who will share with their wives.”

The restrictions have also sparked fierce international criticism and warnings from aid groups that any reduction in the level of humanitarian assistance could leave millions without the ability to feed their families.

“A part of the Taliban leadership appears either not to comprehend the chilling consequences of these latest decisions or they are indifferent to the suffering of millions of ordinary Afghans,” said Markus Potzel, acting head of the U.N. mission in Afghanistan. Potzel did not specify what part of Taliban

leadership he was referring to but warned that some Taliban leaders also appear “prepared to take the country further into isolation away from the community of nations.”

Since taking control of Afghanistan, the Taliban has steadily cracked down on women’s rights. The majority of female government employees were immediately banned from coming to work in 2021.

In March, a surprise last-minute ruling banned girls from secondary school education. In May, an order heavily restricted how women dress in public, and in November, women were banned from public parks and gyms.

Despite many of the bans triggering global outrage and protests across Afghanistan, senior Taliban leadership has so far refused to overturn any of the decisions, defending them as internal issues that should free of outside interference.

Ahmadi, the deputy Taliban spokesman, said that the rulings are necessary for the Taliban to establish nationwide Islamic law and that the international community’s “responsibility” is to continue to help the Afghan people.

During the first months of Taliban rule, security was the group’s primary concern amid fears of a resurgence by the Islamic State group and a simmering resistance movement in the northeastern province of Panjshir. Now, more than a year later, Ahmadi said the group is also focusing on development and social issues. “These are the needs of the people, and they have expectations from us,” he said.

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HEADLINE	01/09 NY 2017 terror attack trial opens
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/09/nyregion/sayfullo-saipov-terror-trial.html
GIST	<p>The Hudson River bike path in Lower Manhattan was transformed that sunny Halloween day in 2017: There were mangled bicycles, their riders lying unconscious or dead, screams filling the air and survivors staggering around wounded as they searched for relatives and friends.</p> <p>“It was a scene of destruction and horror,” a federal prosecutor told a Manhattan jury on Monday at the opening of the trial of Sayfullo Saipov, the man accused of driving a rental truck down the path, killing eight people and wounding more than a dozen others, all in the name of the Islamic State.</p> <p>Mr. Saipov “ran over them, crushed their bodies, sent them flying into the air, left them bleeding to die,” the prosecutor, Alexander Li, said in Federal District Court in Manhattan.</p> <p>“The defendant killed to become a member of ISIS and he did it right here in New York,” he added.</p> <p>Mr. Saipov is the first person to face a death penalty trial during the administration of President Biden, who had campaigned against capital punishment. Shortly after Mr. Saipov’s arrest in 2017, President Donald J. Trump tweeted, “SHOULD GET DEATH PENALTY!” His attorney general later authorized prosecutors in the Southern District of New York to seek Mr. Saipov’s execution if he was convicted.</p> <p>Mr. Saipov’s lawyers last year asked the Justice Department under President Biden to withdraw the death penalty request, but Attorney General Merrick B. Garland refused.</p> <p>On Monday, Mr. Saipov’s lawyer, David E. Patton, the city’s federal public defender, took a surprising tack in his opening statement, admitting that his client, an Uzbek immigrant, had driven the truck down the bike path, causing the deaths and injuries. “It wasn’t an accident — he did it intentionally.” Mr. Patton said.</p> <p>“Mr. Saipov caused unimaginable pain and suffering,” Mr. Patton told the jury. “There is no excuse for what he did, and we will not offer one to you.”</p>

But he disputed the government's assertion that Mr. Saipov carried out the attack in order to join ISIS, an Islamist terrorist group that once held sway over large areas in Iraq and Syria and has pledged to create a new Muslim caliphate. He portrayed his client, who moved to the United States in 2010 at the age of 22 and worked as a long-haul truck driver, as having become caught up in ISIS propaganda. Mr. Patton said he spent many hours consuming ISIS audio and videos and immersing himself in its violent messaging, social media and chat groups.

"He had become convinced that it was a religious obligation for him to commit a martyrdom attack to avenge the killing of Muslims around the world — and that it was God's will that he should do that," Mr. Patton said. "And as we sit here today, he still believes that."

Prosecutors have said that a cellphone found in Mr. Saipov's truck contained about 90 videos, many of which were ISIS-related, including fighters shooting and beheading prisoners and instructions for making a homemade explosive device. The phone also contained 3,800 images, including many of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, then ISIS's leader.

Mr. Li, in his opening statement, said the evidence would show that Mr. Saipov, who lived in Paterson, N.J., drove the truck into Manhattan and headed south on the West Side Highway. As he neared Houston Street, he pulled onto the bike path and almost immediately began plowing into victims.

He slammed into one group of 10 friends from Argentina, who were riding bicycles in pairs.

"The defendant struck and killed every single rider on the left side of the column," Mr. Li said.

As Mr. Saipov drove faster and faster, Mr. Li said, he killed two more people, driving over one man and crushing his body and hitting another, sending his body flying into the air.

As he raced his truck down the path, he crashed into the side of a school bus. Inside were two children and two adults, including the driver. One of the children suffered serious brain damage, Mr. Li said.

Mr. Saipov jumped out of the truck, carrying paintball and pellet guns and yelling "Allahu akbar," Arabic for "God is great," prosecutors have said. He was arrested after he was shot in the abdomen by a New York City police officer.

Mr. Li said the jurors would hear testimony from a government expert who calculated that Mr. Saipov's truck, in the moments before it slammed into the school bus, reached a speed as high as 66 miles per hour.

Of the [eight people killed in the attack](#), six were tourists: the five from Argentina and one from Belgium. The other victims were a 24-year-old computer scientist from Manhattan and a 32-year-old financial worker from a New Jersey suburb.

It was the deadliest terrorist attack in New York City since Sept. 11, 2001, the authorities have said.

Mr. Saipov's attack was one of a number of terrorist attacks around the world in 2016 and 2017, when ISIS encouraged its followers to "act where you are," said Mr. Patton, the defense lawyer. The Islamic State claimed responsibility for a [truck attack in Nice, France, in 2016](#) that left 86 people dead on the national Bastille Day holiday, but a French judge said there was no evidence of a link.

The Manhattan judge, Vernon S. Broderick, told the jury that the trial could last three months. The 12 jurors first will consider whether Mr. Saipov is guilty of the charges, and if they reach that verdict, they will decide whether he should be sentenced to life imprisonment or death.

Mr. Saipov sat quietly in court on Monday between two of his lawyers. He wore a green jacket and a white mask that did not fully cover his scraggly beard. Mr. Saipov turned halfway back in his chair once the jury was dismissed for the lunch break, appearing to glance at the spectators seated behind him.

Mr. Patton, the defense lawyer, told the jury that his client had been held in solitary confinement since his arrest.

In the government's opening statement, Mr. Li told jurors that after Mr. Saipov was arrested, he was treated at Bellevue Hospital, where "he was eager to speak with the F.B.I."

He said he was "proud of his attack," Mr. Li said, that his goal was to kill as many people as possible, and he even asked to display an ISIS flag in his hospital room. A few days later, ISIS issued an announcement that Mr. Saipov had become a soldier of the caliphate and claimed responsibility for the attack, he said.

Mr. Patton told jurors that they would be "called upon to determine" his client's "purpose in committing this attack." He said some might be wondering why it should matter whether Mr. Saipov "did this terrible thing" because he wanted to become a member of ISIS or because he believed that it was God's will.

The reason it mattered, Mr. Patton said, was that the issue was critical to the case. Certain charges against Mr. Saipov say he committed the bike path murders "for the purpose of gaining entrance to ISIS."

One expert, Daniel C. Richman, a criminal law professor at Columbia Law School and former federal prosecutor, said if the jury finds that the government "has not satisfied an element of the crime, they need to acquit on those charges."

Mr. Richman said that since motivation is a critical element of certain charges, "the defense is setting up the argument that this was not somebody fixated on joining an actual terrorist enterprise."

Even if the jury does convict, he added, the defense might seek to argue as a mitigating factor in the death penalty phase that Mr. Saipov's attack was motivated more by ISIS propaganda than by any desire to become a member of the organization.

On Monday, as the prosecutor described the New York attack, many spectators in the gallery appeared tearful, leaning on each other for support. One woman wiped her eyes with a tissue. Some wore headsets that had been handed out to victims and their relatives who had come from overseas to provide a translation of the proceedings.

One woman holding a headset held a laminated photo of a young man who was killed during the attack. A white bandanna was spread out on the bench near her, which read: "Que el amor venza al odio" — Spanish for "may love defeat hate."

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Suspicious, Unusual

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HEADLINE	01/10 Past 8yrs: eight warmest on record
SOURCE	https://www.cnn.com/2023/01/10/world/eight-warmest-years-climate-copernicus-intl/index.html
GIST	<p>The last eight years have been the eight warmest on record as the growing concentration of heat-trapping gases in the atmosphere pushes global temperatures toward a dangerous tipping point, a new report shows.</p> <p>An analysis by the European Union's Copernicus Climate Change Service published on Tuesday said that 2022 was the fifth-warmest year for the planet since records began. It also reported Europe recorded its warmest summer last year and its second warmest year overall, exceeded only by 2020.</p>

Copernicus described 2022 as “a year of [climate extremes](#)” that brought record-breaking [heatwaves in Europe](#), deadly [floods in Pakistan](#), extreme [widespread flooding in Australia](#), and that saw the [Antarctic](#) Sea reach its lowest minimum extent on record.

The report said that annual average temperature reached 1.2 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels, marking the eighth year in a row of temperatures at least 1 degree above the 1850 to 1900 reference period.

Under the 2015 Paris Agreement, most countries agreed to limit warming to well below 2 degrees above pre-industrial levels, but preferably to 1.5 degrees.

The UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) identified the 1.5-degree mark as a key threshold and said breaching it would dramatically increase the risk of extreme weather events and irreversible changes.

Svitlana Krakovska, who heads the Ukrainian delegation to the IPCC, has an analogy for anyone wondering what difference a few degrees of warming could make.

“Your normal body temperature is 36.6. Now we have plus [1.2] degrees and we are already sick. And if we will have 1.5, or 2, look at the difference. We cannot allow this,” she told CNN at the COP27 climate conference in Egypt in November. “Every bit of warming matters,” she said.

The Copernicus report also highlighted the rising atmospheric concentration of CO2 and [methane](#), potent greenhouse gasses that trap heat in the atmosphere and warm the planet.

Before humans started to burn large quantities of fossil fuels, the concentration of CO2 in the atmosphere was around 280 parts per million. According to Copernicus, it hit an annual average of 417 parts per million in 2022, an increase of 2.1 parts per million compared to 2021. Records show the concentration of carbon in the atmosphere has not been this high in around 2 million years, Copernicus added.

The IPCC has said that the world needs to cut greenhouse gas emissions [nearly in half by 2030](#) and achieve net zero by 2050 to have any chance of keeping global warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius above pre-industrial levels.

Scientists say the link between the greenhouse gasses concentrations and the rising temperatures is unmistakable.

“The tumbling of temperature records combined with the unprecedented heatwaves, droughts and intense rainfall and flooding events across the planet, along with the sustained global warmth over the past decade, are all entirely consistent with a world rapidly warming,” Richard Allan, professor in climate science at the University of Reading, told CNN in an email. Allan said this is happening because of “the additional heating effect of the greenhouse gases we’re collectively pumping out into the atmosphere.”

Scientists said 2022 was an exceptionally warm year despite the La Niña phenomenon, which has now been observed for three consecutive years and which normally leads to cooler global average temperatures.

“It is very likely that the recent La Niñas have been masking some of the warming from global climate change,” said Marybeth Arcodia, a postdoctoral researcher at Colorado State University. She added that because El Niño – the opposite phase of La Niña – tends to cause higher than average temperatures, it is “probable that when the next El Niño occurs, the global average temperature will be higher than what we have been seeing in the past few years.”

Extreme heat in Europe

The Copernicus report comes just days after the UK Met Office announced that 2022 was the UK’s hottest year on record, with an average temperature of over 10 degrees Celsius recorded for the first time.

	<p>In a report released last week, the Met Office said that human-induced climate change has made the record-breaking annual temperature around 160 times more likely. Its scientists calculated that what would normally be around “one in 500 year annual temperature” is now likely every three to four years because of climate change.</p> <p>Météo-France, the French national meteorological service, said Friday that 2022 was the hottest year in mainland France since records began in 1900, adding that eight of the warmest 10 years on record occurred since 2010.</p> <p>It said the extreme heat France experienced in 2022 was a “clear sign of climate change” and that similar temperatures could become the norm by mid-century.</p> <p>Italy’s Institute of Atmospheric and Climate Sciences said 2022 was the hottest year on record for Italy, while the German National Meteorological Service said 2022 was “at least” tied for the hottest year on record with 2018, and could surpass 2018 once final data is analyzed this month.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/10 Utah’s Great Salt Lake on verge of collapse
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/jan/10/utah-great-salt-lake-collapse-imminent
GIST	<p>Emergency measures are required to avert a catastrophe in Utah’s Great Salt Lake, which has been drying up due to excessive water use, a new report warns. Within years, the lake’s ecosystems could collapse and millions will be exposed to toxic dust contained within the drying lakebed, unless drastic steps are taken to cut water use.</p> <p>A team of 32 scientists and conservationists caution that the lake could decline beyond recognition in just five years. Their warning is especially urgent amid a historic western megadrought fueled by global heating. To save the lake, the report suggests 30-50% reductions in water use may be required, to allow 2.5m acre-feet of water to flow from streams and rivers directly into the lake over the next two years.</p> <p>“We really need to increase the speed of our response, and also increase our ambition for how much water we restore to the lake,” said Ben Abbott, an ecologist at Brigham Young University and one of the report’s lead authors.</p> <p>Despite growing political momentum, Abbott said that existing policies and action plans will not be enough to save the lake from collapse. Already, the lake has lost 73% of its water and 60% of its surface area, as trillions of litres of water are diverted away from it to supply farms and homes. As a result, the lake is becoming saltier and uninhabitable to native flies and brine shrimp. Eventually, the lake will be unable to sustain the more than 10 million migratory birds and wildlife that frequent the lake.</p> <p>Declining lake levels could also make magnesium, lithium and other critical minerals extraction infeasible within the next two years. Dust from the exposed lakebed could further damage crops, degrade soil and cause snow to melt more quickly – triggering widespread economic losses for Utah’s agriculture and tourism industries. Toxic sediment, laced with arsenic, from the lakebed can exacerbate respiratory conditions and heart and lung disease, and could increase residents’ risk for cancer.</p> <p>“The last nail in the coffin is where we’re at,” said Kevin Perry, a University of Utah atmospheric scientist researching the Great Salt Lake dust. In parts of Utah that already suffer dangerous air quality in the summer and winter due to wildfire smoke and vehicle emissions, dust from the lake threatens to bring year-round pollution, Perry said.</p> <p>The climate crisis, which has increased average temperatures in northern Utah by 4F since the early 1900s, is further imperilling the lake, fueling more severe droughts and heatwaves. But studies suggest that only about 9% of the lake’s decline due to evaporation and reduced runoff can be blamed on climate change.</p>

	<p>A legacy of water overuse is the main threat to the largest saltwater lake in the western hemisphere, and huge water diversions to irrigate vast operations to grow alfalfa and hay are no longer sustainable in Utah, Abbott said, nor are lush lawns in cities and suburbs.</p> <p>Last year, Utah’s legislature allocated \$40m toward restoring the declining lake, and lawmakers at the state and federal level have committed to averting the public health risks posed by the shrinking lake. Joe Biden recently signed into law a defence bill with provisions proposed by Utah senator Mitt Romney to monitor and address the Great Salt Lake crisis.</p> <p>“The only option to avert full collapse of the lake’s ecosystem is to save enough water fast enough,” Abbot said.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/09 Climate crisis worsened extreme weather
SOURCE	https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/jan/09/climate-crisis-extreme-weather-heat-rainfall-drought
GIST	<p>Relentless drought in California, extreme rainfall in the UK, record heat in China – some of the most severe weather events that have occurred around the world in the past few years were made far more likely due to the climate crisis, new research has found.</p> <p>The analysis of extreme events in 2021 and 2022 found that many of these extremes were worsened by global heating, and in some cases would have been almost impossible in terms of their severity if humans had not altered the climate through the burning of fossil fuels.</p> <p>“The extreme nature of these events is very alarming,” said Stephanie Herring, a climate scientist at the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (Noaa).</p> <p>“We need to understand if these events are signs that things are getting hotter faster than we had expected. We know extreme heat is going to get worse, and additional research will help us better quantify future change.”</p> <p>The fingerprint of climate change is being identified across the planet. The risk of extreme drought across California and Nevada was made six times worse by the climate crisis and a strong periodical La Niña climate event from October 2020 to September 2021, while, conversely, extreme rainfall that deluged parts of the UK in May 2021 was 1.5 times more likely due to global heating.</p> <p>A severe hot spell in China in February 2021 was made between four and 20 times more likely because of human-caused climate change, while acute drought in Iran, which it experienced in 2021, is now 50% more likely because of the greenhouse gases humanity has pumped into the atmosphere.</p> <p>A swath of other severe impacts can be attributed, at least in part, to the influence of the climate crisis, including the weather that caused a dangerous wildfire in Cape Town, South Africa, in 2021 to be 90% more likely than if we had never heated up the planet and even the persistent cloudiness over the Tibetan plateau that reduced vegetation growth, caused, researchers say, by elevated global temperatures along with abnormal winds and localized pollution.</p> <p>The compendium of research, presented by Noaa at a conference on Monday, draws together some of the latest examples of climate attribution, where scientists have managed to pinpoint the influence of human-induced climate change upon individual weather events and disasters.</p> <p>Previously, Herring said that scientists were very reluctant to talk about the climate change influence upon discrete events, preferring a more general probabilistic framing, but that this messaging has “evolved over time as the research has increased” into more exact attribution methods.</p> <p>Using increasingly powerful climate models, along with historical observations, scientists are now able to provide more a precise, and rapid, assessment of the influence of the climate crisis on certain</p>

	<p>disasters. The heavy rain that caused devastating floods in Nigeria, Niger and Chad last year, for example, was made about 80 times more likely by the climate crisis, one study has found.</p> <p>Herring warned that many of the temperatures now being seen are well beyond any modern historical norms and are pushing humanity into a new, dangerous state. A heatwave in South Korea in October 2021, for example, was so drastic, at almost 7F higher than normal, that it would be considered an event that would only happen every 6,250 years. But the climate models predict that this will become the new normal for South Korea by 2060 if planet-heating gases are not radically cut.</p> <p>The same fate may well await the normally temperature Pacific north-west of the US, where around 600 people died as a roasting heatwave pummeled the region in 2021. A subsequent study found the climate crisis made the heatwave 43 times more likely.</p> <p>“Human-caused climate change is an extreme disruption of the Earth system,” said Paul Higgins, associate executive director of the American Meteorological Society.</p> <p>“We should expect it to lead to more extreme events, as this new research helps to show. We must do what we can to help people, and all life, thrive in spite of this danger.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/08 UN: ozone layer slowly healing by 2066
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/science-health-climate-and-environment-united-nations-us-news-83794d6e5ae6c4469b60effb185d1509
GIST	<p>DENVER (AP) — Earth’s protective ozone layer is slowly but noticeably healing at a pace that would fully mend the hole over Antarctica in about 43 years, a new United Nations report says.</p> <p>A once-every-four-years scientific assessment found recovery in progress, more than 35 years after every nation in the world agreed to stop producing chemicals that chomp on the layer of ozone in Earth’s atmosphere that shields the planet from harmful radiation linked to skin cancer, cataracts and crop damage.</p> <p>“In the upper stratosphere and in the ozone hole we see things getting better,” said Paul Newman, co-chair of the scientific assessment.</p> <p>The progress is slow, according to the report presented Monday at the American Meteorological Society convention in Denver. The global average amount of ozone 18 miles (30 kilometers) high in the atmosphere won’t be back to 1980 pre-thinning levels until about 2040, the report said. And it won’t be back to normal in the Arctic until 2045.</p> <p>Antarctica, where it’s so thin there’s an annual giant gaping hole in the layer, won’t be fully fixed until 2066, the report said.</p> <p>Scientists and environmental advocates across the world have long hailed the efforts to heal the ozone hole — springing out of a 1987 agreement called the Montreal Protocol that banned a class of chemicals often used in refrigerants and aerosols — as one of the biggest ecological victories for humanity.</p> <p>“Ozone action sets a precedent for climate action. Our success in phasing out ozone-eating chemicals shows us what can and must be done – as a matter of urgency — to transition away from fossil fuels, reduce greenhouse gases and so limit temperature increase,” World Meteorological Organization Secretary-General Prof. Petteri Taalas said in a statement.</p> <p>Signs of healing were reported four years ago but were slight and more preliminary. “Those numbers of recovery have solidified a lot,” Newman said.</p> <p>The two chief chemicals that munch away at ozone are in lower levels in the atmosphere, said Newman, chief Earth scientist at NASA’s Goddard Space Flight Center. Chlorine levels are down 11.5% since they</p>

peaked in 1993 and bromine, which is more efficient at eating ozone but is at lower levels in the air, dropped 14.5% since its 1999 peak, the report said.

That bromine and chlorine levels “stopped growing and is coming down is a real testament to the effectiveness of the Montreal Protocol,” Newman said.

“There has been a sea change in the way our society deals with ozone depleting substances,” said scientific panel co-chair David W. Fahey, director of the U.S. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s chemical sciences lab.

Decades ago, people could go into a store and buy a can of refrigerants that eat away at the ozone, punch a hole in it and pollute the atmosphere, Fahey said. Now, not only are the substances banned but they are no longer much in people’s homes or cars, replaced by cleaner chemicals.

Natural weather patterns in the Antarctic also affect ozone hole levels, which peak in the fall. And the past couple years, the [holes have been a bit bigger](#) because of that but the overall trend is one of healing, Newman said.

This is “saving 2 million people every year from skin cancer,” United Nations Environment Programme Director Inger Andersen told The Associated Press earlier this year in an email.

A few years ago emissions of one of the banned chemicals, chlorofluorocarbon-11 (CFC-11), stopped shrinking [and was rising](#). Rogue emissions were spotted in part of China but now have gone back down to where they are expected, Newman said.

A third generation of those chemicals, called HFC, was banned a few years ago not because it would eat at the ozone layer but because it is a heat-trapping greenhouse gas. The new report says that the ban would avoid 0.5 to 0.9 degrees (0.3 to 0.5 degrees Celsius) of additional warming.

The report also warned that efforts to artificially cool the planet by putting aerosols into the atmosphere to reflect the sunlight would thin the ozone layer by as much as 20% in Antarctica.

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HEADLINE	01/09 Puget Sound fish carrying fewer parasites
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/seattle-news/environment/puget-sound-fish-carrying-fewer-parasites-and-thats-not-a-good-thing/
GIST	<p>Katherine Maslenikov carefully plucked a young walleye pollock specimen from a glass jar full of ethyl alcohol. The critter’s eye and insides were missing, some carefully packed in a nearby vial labeled “inner organs.”</p> <p>Maslenikov is the steward of the millions of fish specimens dating back to the 1800s neatly organized in a massive library of jars hidden in the basement of the University of Washington’s fisheries teaching and research building.</p> <p>In their flesh are thousands of parasites — worms and other critters that lived off their host — that could reveal a hidden effect of climate change. Researchers fished out more than 17,000 parasites of the nearly 700 fish they studied. But as they moved to newer samples, they found fewer and fewer of the passengers.</p> <p>In a study published Monday, scientists concluded that warming water may have caused some parasite populations in Puget Sound to plummet. The research suggests parasites may be especially vulnerable to global warming.</p> <p>“It’s really our first peek into what parasites have been up to over the past couple of decades,” lead researcher Chelsea Wood said. “It’s a warning. It suggests that there might be more loss of parasite biodiversity than we previously anticipated.”</p>

The loss of parasites could have implications for the long-term stability of Puget Sound ecosystems, according to the study, now the world's largest and longest data set of parasite abundance.

As a whole, the oceans are taking up more than 90% of the extra heat in the climate system: the atmosphere, the oceans, ice pack, land and living things, said Nick Bond, Washington state climatologist and professor at the University of Washington.

"Puget Sound is along for the ride," he said.

This decline in parasite abundance was correlated with increases in sea surface temperature measured at the Race Rocks lighthouse, off the coast of British Columbia, where saltwater spills into the Salish Sea from the Pacific Ocean.

Researchers in 2019 began carefully slicing open the bellies of eight species of fish including herring, hake, rockfish, pollock and perch, collected from 1880 to 2019 and held at UW, identifying and tallying parasites along the way.

They found 85 types of parasites including arthropods, little crablike or shelled creatures, and "unbelievably gorgeous tapeworms," Wood said.

There was no significant change in abundance of parasites that require one or two hosts. But, those with complex life cycles, or those who relied on three or more hosts, declined in abundance at a rate of about 40% for every roughly 1.8-degree Fahrenheit increase in surface water temperature.

That decline is likely because climate change is affecting the parasites' host species. Rising water temperatures and increasing amounts of carbon absorbed by the ocean are damaging marine habitats and the fish, crustaceans and shellfish that rely upon them. But some species may continue to thrive, while others decline.

If the parasite relies on some declining species as hosts, even if they had some thriving host species in their life cycle, they were ultimately likely to decline.

The researchers' analysis showed an 11% average decline per decade in abundance of parasites with complex life cycles. Of 10 parasite species that had disappeared completely by 1980, nine relied on three or more hosts.

"There's a limited amount that you can benefit from having a host that's a winner," Wood said. "But if you have a host that's a loser there's like infinite possible destruction that can happen."

Why should people care about parasites?

Think back to the early 1900s, Wood said, when many predators were perceived as vermin. Take wolves, for example. They were a threat to livestock, and potentially to people.

But when they were removed from Yellowstone National Park, the ecosystem became a Tilt-a-Whirl. Elk populations soared and decimated vegetation that other species relied upon. Beaver and bison were left without some of their main food sources.

When wolves were reintroduced in the 1990s, a wave of green returned to the park.

Parasites play a similar role in the stability of an ecosystem, Wood said, and without them, host species populations would explode.

	<p>Biodiversity, or the variety of living species, is the best means to slow the effects of climate change. Healthy ecosystems are more resilient. But a changing climate is also one of the main drivers in the loss of biodiversity.</p> <p>“There’s something about having top predators to kind of weed out those sick and weak that it’s important to have that kind of competition there,” Bond said. “Those stressors, and certainly all biological systems, have evolved with parasites.”</p> <p>There are conservation efforts for many other species impacted by a changing climate and human intervention, but not yet parasites.</p> <p>Of the three environmental variables examined in the study — pollutants, fish density and sea surface temperature — only temperature could explain the overall change in parasite counts.</p> <p>More studies need to be performed outside Puget Sound before any generalizations can be made about the broad impacts of climate change on parasites in the ocean. It’s unclear if the decline could be happening in freshwater ecosystems, or other saltwater ecosystems, Wood said. She has already begun studying the impacts in the Gulf of Alaska.</p> <p>“If this is a general pattern,” Wood said, “this suggests to me that we should be investing more heavily in parasite conservation.”</p>
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HEADLINE	01/09 Tourists destroying coral reefs in Hawaii
SOURCE	https://abcnews.go.com/US/hawaiian-coral-reefs-degrading-popular-tourist-sites-scientists/story?id=96308858
GIST	<p>The millions of tourists who flock to the shores of Hawaii every year are wreaking havoc on its natural environment -- especially the coral reefs, which are at risk all over the world, a new study said.</p> <p>The most popular coral reefs on the Hawaiian islands are likely being degraded by the very visitors they attract, according to a study published Monday in Nature Sustainability.</p> <p>Researchers from Princeton University combed through more than 250,000 geotagged Instagram posts from 2018 to 2021 by tourists visiting Hawaiian reefs and compared them with flyover maps of live coral cover. They then used artificial intelligence to analyze reef map images at about a 2-meter resolution, or about 6.5 feet, and 16-meter, or 52.5-feet, depth, according to the study.</p> <p>Bing Lin, a PhD candidate in science, technology and environmental policy at Princeton University's School of Public and International Affairs and the lead author of the study, got the idea to use social media for the research after doing fieldwork in Hawaii in 2021 and realizing that one of the first things people do when they visit a site is to take a photo and post it to Instagram, he told ABC News.</p> <p>"They take pictures of the beaches, and they post on social media," he said. "Instagram is by far the main platform through which social media presence is documented, and so I came up with the idea of using Instagram to get a sense of a large-scale representation of where people are distributed in Hawaii."</p> <p>The scientists found that the accessible sites with more live coral cover were visited more often, but that at the popular sites, coral covers were more degraded compared to those at less popular sites, the paper states.</p> <p>"We were able to find that coral reefs not only played a really significant role in attracting tourism, but also that the tourism subsequently seemed to suppress live coral coverage at the sites in which tourism was most concentrated," Lin said.</p>

While tourism is mostly concentrated on the shoreline, with lots of activity on the beach, many tourists end up on excursions in which they venture further into the ocean for snorkeling or scuba diving, Lin said.

Using keywords included in captions and hashtags, such as "#scubadiving," Lin was also able to determine a certain degree of interaction with the reefs. Corals tended to thrive farther out into the water, where there are less people, Lin said.

The degradation can happen in the form of diver contact, when divers intentionally or accidentally come in contact with the reefs, as well as elevated pollution in areas that tourists frequent, Lin said.

Places in Oahu in Honolulu County, such as Waikiki Beach and Waimea Bay, were among the biggest spots for degraded reefs, Lin said. On the Big Island, Lanikai Beach and Shark's Cove were also among the sites with the most degraded coral, he added.

Coral reefs are vulnerable all over the world due to ocean water warming and pollution. A study published in the [Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences](#) in 2021 found that coral reefs could stop growing in 10 years unless greenhouse gases are significantly reduced.

Coral bleaching, a process that occurs when water is too warm and the algae the corals expel from their tissues cause them to turn completely white, is inundating reefs all over the world, including the [Great Barrier Reef](#) in Australia.

In addition to their biodiversity and beauty, coral reefs serve as vital ecosystems, nurture fisheries and protect coasts.

Included in the reef tourism industry should be a method to incentivize conservation by generating funds and supporting local livelihoods focused on protecting the reefs. The United Nations' [2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#) has set goals to promote sustainable use of marine and coastal resources, but tourists can harm live corals directly or indirectly, such as by polluting the surrounding sea.

"The impacts of tourism is detectable across hundreds of sites," Lin said.

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Crime, Criminals

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HEADLINE	01/09 New Orleans 2022 horrific homicide rate
SOURCE	https://www.foxnews.com/us/new-orleans-closes-2022-sky-high-homicide-rate-decades-horrific
GIST	<p>New Orleans has been cherished as one of America's most historic and beautiful cities, attracting tourists from around the world to experience its melting pot of cultures, food and sensational nightlife. However, in 2022, the Big Easy was ravaged by violent crimes putting a damper on the city's party spirit.</p> <p>"It's been a horrific year, and a horrific close to a horrific year," said Jeff Asher, a crime analyst who works for the City Council, according to the New Orleans Advocate. "The numbers speak for themselves."</p> <p>In September, New Orleans unseated St. Louis as America's "Murder Capital," recording 52 homicides per 100,000 residents. St. Louis, which has long been ranked and considered one of the country's most dangerous cities, had 45 homicides per 100,000 residents that same month.</p> <p>In the following months, violence continued raging in the city, clocking in 280 homicides for calendar year 2022 and a homicide rate of 70 per 100,000 people, WDSU reported.</p> <p>The New Orleans Police Department shared with Fox News Digital that final tallies for the year are still being tabulated, and as of Thursday, they have officially counted 277 homicides, not 280.</p>

The final days of the year were especially bloody, including local comedian Brandon "Boogie B." Montrell getting shot and killed outside a downtown grocery store, two teenagers fatally shot at a house party and a man fatally shot in the French Quarter in broad daylight by a juvenile. By Dec. 28, the city was looking at the highest number of homicides in 26 years at 277.

New Orleans recorded its lowest level of homicides in nearly 50 years back in 2019, reporting 119 homicides. The Metropolitan Crime Commission, a nonprofit based out of New Orleans, also calculated that there were 280 homicides in the city last year, reporting that this data marks a 131% increase in violent crime compared to 2019.

Homicide was not the only crime to balloon in 2022 compared to pre-pandemic levels. The Metropolitan Crime Commission data also show shootings increased by 88% last year when compared to data from 2019. Carjackings increased by 156% compared to 2019, and armed robberies were up 20%.

The pandemic's lockdowns throttled New Orleans' economy in 2020, with the city losing an estimated \$200 million per week as its typical visitors remained home, PBS reported in 2021. Restaurants and businesses shuttered due to financial blows from both COVID lockdowns and Category 4 Hurricane Ida ripping through the Crescent City in 2021.

New Orleans is not alone in seeing a crime spike in recent years. In 2020, murders increased by nearly 30% across the country when compared to the year prior, according to FBI data. It marked the largest single-year increase in killings since the agency began tracking the crimes.

While the pandemic raged, protests and riots following the killing of George Floyd erupted across the country, bringing with it anti-police rhetoric that spurred cops from coast-to-coast into resignation and early retirement over cratering morale.

Experts who have previously spoken to Fox News Digital pointed to an array of variables that have likely contributed to the increases since 2020, including anti-police rhetoric voiced by Black Lives Matter and defund-the-police proponents, the pandemic, a culture of lawlessness promoted by liberal district attorneys, and the "Ferguson effect" — when police pull back, violent crimes spike.

Like many other city and local police departments, New Orleans has also been coping with police department staffing issues. Staffing problems hit a fever pitch in September, once the city earned the "Murder Capital" of the U.S. designation.

The NOPD also announced in the same month it would hire civilians to help respond to calls that do not require the presence of a police officer, to help handle administrative duties, and even to conduct detective work. The plan was unveiled to get more cops on the streets to deal with the crime spike.

Among those who left the police force was its top cop, Superintendent Shaun Ferguson. He was chosen by Mayor LaToya Cantrell in 2019 to lead the department and soon found himself in the midst of controversy as crime spiked and staffing levels tanked. Ferguson, who Cantrell lauded as a "great leader, a great partner and a great friend," retired last month.

Cantrell named Michelle Woodfork as the city's interim police chief, marking the first time a Black woman will lead the department, while the city conducts an already-fraught national search for a permanent chief. On Jan. 5, FOX8 reported that national firm Police Executive Research Forum declined New Orleans' City Council's written request to recruit potential candidates.

"You have to hit all the six pillars of policing for the 21st century. Building trust with community, legitimacy, education and training, safety and wellness of your officers, social media and technology I'm going to bring all this and more to the police department," Woodfork told New Orleans talk radio station WBOK last month of how she will lead the department.

Amid the crime wave, critics have battered the Democratic mayor with outrage over her handling of crime and even launched a recall effort. In addition to the city's crime issues, critics are calling Cantrell out for what they see as questionable trips to Europe and expenditures, as well as lacking city services, such as trash pickup and streetlights.

"The national term 'quiet quitting,' that's what our mayor has done," Eileen Carter previously told Fox News Digital, referring to the term for employees who do the bare minimum in their jobs. "Our mayor literally won't say the word 'crime.' She has disassociated herself from crime. She refuses to be involved in it at all." Carter is Cantrell's former social media manager who partnered with Belden "Noonie Man" Batiste, a former New Orleans mayoral candidate, to file a recall petition over the summer.

Cantrell addressed 2022's crime last week, calling on District Attorney Jason Williams' office to "do better" with criminal cases, citing cases that have been dismissed or stalled. Williams was acquitted of federal tax fraud charges in late July.

"The New Orleans Police Department needs to be notified in a timely manner when individuals are returning to our streets," Cantrell stated at a press conference. "That helps us in our deployment strategies because we know where those individuals will return in terms of those neighborhoods and communities."

As the city scrambles to address the violent crime issues, homicides have so far not backed down in 2023. It took only four hours into the new year for police to launch their first homicide investigation after a fatal shooting in Central City, Fox affiliate WVUE reported.

There were also at least four stabbings, three robberies and three shootings by Jan. 2. On Jan. 3, police made another grisly discovery during a wellness check at one home. Three dead bodies that had likely gone unnoticed for days surrounded by some bullets on the floor.

"Now is really the time, it's been the time, but now more than ever because we see how we started the year, we don't want this to progress at all," Cantrell added in her remarks last week.

In an exclusive statement to Fox News Digital, City Councilman Eugene Green stated that "the levels of crime in our City are tragic, unacceptable, inexcusable, and not inevitable. There is no excuse for making victims of and hurting other people."

The mayor's office did not respond by time of publication to Fox News Digital's request for comment on 2022's crime data and the recall effort launched against her.

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HEADLINE	01/09 Arrest: Albuquerque shootings suspect
SOURCE	https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/09/us/albuquerque-democrat-officials-shootings-arrest.html
GIST	<p>The authorities in Albuquerque announced Monday that a suspect in the recent shootings at the homes or offices of a half-dozen Democratic elected officials was in custody on unrelated charges and that they had recovered a gun used in at least one of the shootings.</p> <p>Officials did not release information on the suspect other than to say that he is a man under 50; nor would they say what the unrelated charges were.</p> <p>"We are still trying to link and see which cases are related and which cases are not related," Albuquerque Police Chief Harold Medina said at a news conference on Monday afternoon.</p> <p>Officials have ideas about a possible motive, Chief Medina said, but will not release details for fear of compromising the investigation.</p> <p>The authorities have not definitively tied the shootings to politics or ideology.</p>

Police officials asked the courts to seal all paperwork related to the case, Chief Medina said. He said that the authorities had numerous search warrants and were waiting for additional evidence.

No one was hurt in the shootings, four of which happened in December and two that took place this month. The shootings involved four homes, a workplace and a campaign office associated with two county commissioners, two state senators and New Mexico's newly elected attorney general.

The police had provided details last week on five of the shootings. On Monday, they said that they were also investigating a shooting that occurred in early December and caused damage to the home of Javier Martínez, a New Mexico state representative set to become the State Legislature's next speaker of the House.

Mr. Martínez said he had heard the gunfire in December, and recently discovered the damage after he heard of the attacks related to the other elected officials. He decided to inspect the outside of his home, [KOB](#) reported.

In addition to the Albuquerque Police Department, the New Mexico State Police and Bernalillo County Sheriff's Office are investigating the shootings.

If a federal crime was committed, the Police Department will pursue those charges, Chief Medina said. "The federal system has much stronger teeth than our state system," he said.

The shootings came at a time when public officials have faced a surge in violent threats, extending from [members of Congress](#) to [a Supreme Court justice](#).

Mayor Tim Keller of Albuquerque said he hoped the fact that a suspect was in custody would provide some comfort to elected officials, who he said should be able to do their jobs without fear.

"These are individuals who participate in democracy, whether we agree with them or not," Mr. Keller said. "And that's why this act of violence, I think, has been so rattling for so many people."

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HEADLINE	01/09 Idaho killings 'internet sleuths' a 'problem'
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/internet-sleuths-in-idaho-murder-case-becoming-a-problem-former-fbi-agent-says
GIST	<p>MOSCOW, Idaho - While experts say it would not be out of the ordinary for Idaho murder suspect Bryan Kohberger to have attended a vigil for the victims he allegedly slaughtered in November, one is warning allegations being made by "internet sleuths" are "becoming a problem" in the investigation.</p> <p>Former FBI special agent Jonathan Gilliam joined "Fox & Friends First" Monday to discuss the latest on the murder investigation and what armchair detectives are saying about the case.</p> <p>Rich Pasqua, who said he is a former acquaintance of Idaho murders suspect Bryan Kohberger, recalled the interactions they had and the behavior Kohberger displayed.</p> <p>"That's actually pretty common for killers to somewhat show back up at the crime scene or at a vigil, and as we saw that he returned back to the crime scene even later the day after he allegedly did this," Gilliam told co-host Todd Piro. "I don't think it would be a far-fetched thing for him to show up to this vigil."</p> <p>But Gilliam was quick to note that although it is very possible Kohberger attended the event honoring the lives of the four slain University of Idaho students, the "internet sleuths" are now facilitating issues within the investigation.</p> <p>"One problem I'm having today is with these internet sleuths. I didn't have a problem with him at first, but I think now the problem is that they are inciting things," Gilliam said. "In the case of the girl who... the</p>

roommate who didn't call police immediately. They're making mountains out of molehills, and they're actually, in the case of this girl, causing the public to turn on certain people."

"So the online sleuths are becoming a problem, and also mainstream media is starting to report things that they say that don't really make any difference at all to the entire case," he continued.

Idaho murder suspect Bryan Kohberger made a tasteless joke while locked up in a Pennsylvania prison for five days, according to a new report.

Jennifer Coffindaffer, also a former FBI agent, echoed Gilliam's sentiment regarding Kohberger's possible attendance on "Fox & Friends First."

"They want to be in the midst of what's happening, listen to the rumors, be abreast of everything," Coffindaffer said. "I would believe whoever committed this murder watched closely on social media, mainstream media, not only eating it up for tips as to what the investigation, the direction it was going, but also sort of seeing before him what he had done play out in the media."

"He loves this attention," she continued.

Kohberger was [arrested in December](#) in connection with the murders of Ethan Chapin, 20, Xana Kernodle, 20, Kaylee Goncalves, 21, and Madison Mogen, 21 on November 13.

He was extradited to Idaho last week after being held in a Pennsylvania jail.

If convicted, Kohberger could face the death penalty. The motive for the massacre remains unclear.

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HEADLINE	01/09 Pierce Co. ME: 11yr-old died from fentanyl
SOURCE	https://www.q13fox.com/news/medical-examiner-11-year-old-died-from-fentanyl-in-her-system-not-fight-at-school
GIST	<p>TACOMA, Wash. - The Pierce County Medical Examiner determined that an 11-year-old who died earlier this year died as a result from fentanyl in her system, not due to an altercation at school for which she was hospitalized.</p> <p>On May 20, 11-year-old Lenyia Swansey-Faafiti was involved in an "altercation" with another student at Ford Middle School. Shortly after, she was rushed to the Mary Bridge Children's Hospital, where she died several days later.</p> <p>Protesters gathered outside the middle school to demand district-wide changes, since many believed she had been bullied and that her injuries were a result of the altercation.</p> <p>Deputies said in May that they didn't believe her death was related to the fight.</p> <p>The Pierce County Sheriff's Department said they have conducted a full investigation and found no evidence of fentanyl in her home, where she lived with her grandparents, or at school. It's unclear how she came into contact with the fentanyl.</p> <p>Her official cause of death is "anoxic encephalopathy due to acute fentanyl intoxication," and the manner of death is unknown.</p> <p>According to the National Institutes of Health, anoxic encephalopathy is described as a "process that begins with the cessation of cerebral blood flow to brain tissue, which most commonly results from poisoning, as is the case, for example with carbon monoxide poisoning or drug overdose, vascular injury, or insult, or cardiac arrest. Many patients who suffer anoxic brain injury expire without regaining full consciousness, and many have very poor neurologic outcomes."</p>

HEADLINE	01/09 Intentional: 6yr-old shot teacher in class
SOURCE	https://apnews.com/article/teaching-newport-news-education-25cebfde17e46abc435c205210a7073d
GIST	<p>NEWPORT NEWS, Va. (AP) — In the moments before a 6-year-old Virginia boy shot his teacher, there was no fight, no physical struggle and no warning, authorities said Monday.</p> <p>“What we know today is that she was providing instruction. He displayed a firearm, he pointed it and he fired one round,” Newport News police Chief Steve Drew said.</p> <p>Drew, who spoke during a news conference, offered the first detailed description of a shooting that shocked the city and was notable even in a country like the United States that seems inured to constant gun violence. Drew had previously said that the shooting was not accidental and had declined to elaborate.</p> <p>Drew said he wanted to clarify remarks he made just after the shooting on Friday, when he said there was an “altercation” before the shooting. He said it was more like an “interaction” between the boy and his first-grade teacher at Richneck Elementary School, 25-year-old Abby Zwerner.</p> <p>But Drew also reiterated that the shooting was “not accidental.”</p> <p>“It was intentional,” he said.</p> <p>Drew also revealed that the 9mm handgun used by the boy was legally purchased by his mother and was in the family’s home. He said the boy brought it to school in his backpack the day of the shooting.</p> <p>Zwerner put up her hand in a defensive position when the gun fired, and the bullet went through her hand and into her upper chest, Drew said. Although her injuries were initially considered life-threatening, she has improved and is currently listed in stable condition at a hospital.</p> <p>Drew hailed Zwerner as a hero for quickly hustling her students out of the classroom after she was shot. He said surveillance video shows she was the last person to leave her classroom.</p> <p>“She made a right turn and started down the hallway, and then she stopped. ... She turned around and make sure every one of those students was safe,” Drew said.</p> <p>Drew said a school employee rushed into the classroom and physically restrained the boy after hearing the gunshot. He said the boy became “a little combative” and struck the employee. Police officers arrived and escorted him out of the building and into a police car.</p> <p>The boy has been held at a medical facility since an emergency custody order and temporary detention order were issued Friday, Drew said. He said it will be up to a judge to determine what the next steps are for the boy. He also said the boy’s mother has been interviewed by police, but it is unclear whether she could potentially face any charges.</p> <p>As questions loomed about the boy and his mother, Zwerner’s friend told a crowd gathered at a Monday night vigil that the first-grade teacher has shown “dedication and love for what she does day in and day out.”</p> <p>“Abby is a warrior and she demonstrates mental and physical strength every day,” said Rosalie List, a 2nd grade teacher at Richneck. “I’m so proud of her.”</p> <p>Lauren Palladini, Richneck’s school counselor, told the crowd that Zwerner is “sweet. She’s thoughtful. She’s caring. And she’s been one of the most amazing teachers that I’ve been blessed to interact with.”</p>

Amanda Bartley, who teaches at another elementary school in the city, asked everyone to pray for Zwerner and to “pray for the young man who did this.”

As she passed out candles before the vigil, Bartley told The Associated Press that she organized the event to support Zwerner and to uplift others. But, she said, many questions remain unanswered.

Among them: “How did he get the gun? Why wasn’t it locked up? A good gun owner knows that you lock up your weapon. You have a safety on. You keep the ammunition separate from the weapon itself.”

Gun owners can be prosecuted under a Virginia law that prohibits anyone from recklessly leaving a loaded, unsecured gun in a manner that endangers the life or limb of children under 14. A violation of that law is a misdemeanor, punishable by a maximum jail sentence of one year and a maximum fine of \$2,500.

Virginia does not have a law that requires unattended guns to be stored in a particular way or a law that requires gun owners to affirmatively lock their weapons.

“Virginia definitely has a weaker law than many other states that have child access prevention laws,” said Allison Anderman, senior counsel and director of local policy at Giffords Law Center to Prevent Gun Violence.

Legal experts said even though it is theoretically possible under Virginia law to criminally charge a 6-year-old child, there are numerous obstacles to doing so and it’s highly unlikely that any prosecutor would even try.

To be tried as an adult in Virginia, a juvenile must be at least 14. A 6-year-old is also too young to be committed to the custody of the Department of Juvenile Justice if found guilty. In addition, a common law doctrine known as the “infancy defense” holds that children under 7 cannot be prosecuted for a crime because they are so young that they are incapable of forming criminal intent.

A judge would also have to find that the child was competent to stand trial, meaning that he could understand the legal proceedings against him and assist in his own defense, said Andrew Block, a professor and the University of Virginia School of Law who was the director of Virginia’s Department of Juvenile Justice from 2014 to 2019.

“It’s virtually impossible to imagine a 6-year-old being found competent to stand trial,” Block said.

Julie E. McConnell, a law professor at the University of Richmond who has worked on youth justice cases for more than 25 years, said prosecutors can file what’s known as a “Child in Need of Services” petition in cases in which a child’s behavior or condition presents or results in a serious threat to the child’s well-being and physical safety.

A judge would then have an array of options, including: ordering services such as counseling or anger management; allowing the child to remain with his parents, subject to conditions; ordering the parents to participate in programs or cooperate in treatment; or transferring custody of the child to a relative, child welfare agency or a local social services agency.

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HEADLINE	01/09 PCSO: young girls robbed at gunpoint
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/south-sound-news/two-girls-ages-11-13-robbed-sandwiches-gunpoint-spanaway/L4L4AXRVTBGTTTHKY4AZ7BOTL5M/
GIST	According to the Pierce County Sheriff’s Office, two girls were the victims of an armed robbery in Spanaway on Saturday.

	<p>At about 4:40 p.m. Saturday, deputies responded to a report of an armed robbery in the 20200 block of Hidden Village Drive East in Spanaway.</p> <p>Two girls, ages 11 and 13, had been walking home after buying sandwiches at a nearby restaurant when they were approached by four boys.</p> <p>As the 11-year-old quickly called her mother, she felt an object pressed against the back of her neck. The 13-year-old told her it was a gun.</p> <p>The boys demanded the girls give them all of their stuff, and the girls handed over the sandwiches and the phone.</p> <p>The boys told the girls not to tell anyone what happened and ran off.</p> <p>The Pierce County Sheriff's Office did not provide descriptions of the suspects.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/09 Experts: odometer fraud on rise in WA
SOURCE	https://www.kiro7.com/news/local/experts-say-odometer-fraud-is-rise-washington-state/3PFAHVPSK5ED5LNWVTAPZEF3MU/
GIST	<p>Checking the odometer may not be high on your list of priorities when buying a used car, but it's important to keep in mind.</p> <p>Experts say despite the move to digital, it's never been easier or cheaper to remove thousands of miles from a car's history.</p> <p>Josh Ingle, an expert in automotive electronics, showed KIRO 7's Jesse Jones just how easy it is to roll back a vehicle's odometer.</p> <p>"You literally need to be able to read and add (and) subtract," said Ingle. "You can do those two things. You know, you pass the first-grade test. You can operate one of these tools."</p> <p>The tool costs 300 bucks, and it works in seconds.</p> <p>CARFAX estimates there are 30,600 vehicles in Washington state that have a rolled-back odometer.</p> <p>That's up 10% from last year, placing the state at 17th in the nation.</p> <p>According to CARFAX, all that hits consumers, costing them thousands of dollars.</p> <p>"In this current used car market where you're already paying top dollar, if you buy a vehicle and don't know that it has a rolled back odometer on average, you're going to be spending an extra \$4,000 on top of already record high prices," said Emilie Voss, CARFAX spokesperson.</p> <p>Or it could cost you even more.</p> <p>We checked out the values of two cars that were nearly identical, except for the mileage. One was 150,000 miles, and the other just 50,000. But the difference in price? More than \$6,000.</p> <p>"If you buy the vehicle thinking it has 50,000, but really it has 150,000, the wear and tear is different. It has different needs. You're going to have to replace parts that maybe you weren't expecting to have to replace," said Voss. "So there's the upfront cost, and then there's the cost over the lifetime of the ownership. And then when you go to sell it, you're going to get less for it as well."</p> <p>So how do you protect yourself? Get a CARFAX report.</p>

	<p>CARFAX keeps mileage readings for a vehicle's lifetime at different points using service records and registrations from state DMVs.</p> <p>You can also get a second opinion from an independent mechanic — they can see if the mileage on a vehicle matches the wear.</p>
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HEADLINE	01/09 Idaho slayings haunt WSU, Pullman
SOURCE	https://www.seattletimes.com/nation-world/sleepless-nights-locked-doors-latest-idaho-killing-details-haunt-suspects-school/
GIST	<p>PULLMAN — The spring semester started here Monday in a town unsettled and traumatized by the latest information in the killings of four University of Idaho students, days after the public learned that the suspect had been living in their midst for weeks.</p> <p>Fear and grief had rippled through Pullman after the fatal stabbings in nearby Moscow, Idaho, but few at Washington State University had imagined the man who would be charged with the brutal crimes was in town. Now, despite the arrest of 28-year-old Bryan Kohberger, the fear has heightened, not abated, some in Pullman said, thanks to the information revealed in authorities' charging document Thursday, just five days before classes resumed.</p> <p>One woman said she was having trouble sleeping; another kept replaying the daily walks that took her past the suspect's apartment. Professors were in trauma workshops, and one of Kohberger's former students said the school appeared to be removing his email history.</p> <p>"It's kind of like your feeling of safety is shattered," said Kim Sheets, a graduate student in anthropology who lives in the apartment complex where Kohberger had resided. "I've never felt unsafe here before," she said, adding, "I'm more cautious now."</p> <p>Kohberger, who was enrolled in WSU's criminal justice doctoral program, was arrested Dec. 30 in Albrightsville, Pa., in the Pocono Mountains, where his family lives, and was extradited to Idaho. He was charged in the Nov. 13 killings of Madison Mogen, 21; Kaylee Goncalves, 21; Xana Kernodle, 20; and Ethan Chapin, 20, at their off-campus home in Moscow, where the killings terrified students and have left the University of Idaho campus grieving.</p> <p>A public defender in Pennsylvania previously said Kohberger, who agreed to be extradited to Idaho, believed he would be exonerated.</p> <p>Police had shared little about the progress of the investigation in the wake of the early morning attack, leading some victims' families to publicly worry whether the case had gone cold. But the affidavit unsealed Thursday detailed how authorities said they used DNA, a witness account, cellphone records and surveillance footage to charge Kohberger with four counts of murder and a burglary count.</p> <p>It was those details, along with the knowledge that Kohberger had stayed in Pullman after the killings until winter break, that many students and faculty members were still grappling with this weekend.</p> <p>The university's criminal justice faculty spent last week in crisis and trauma training, said an academic who spoke on the condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to speak publicly. The faculty is reeling from the news that one of their students stands accused of the killings, the person said.</p> <p>"I really can't say anything," the academic said. "They are crushed over there."</p> <p>One professor declined to comment, and 12 did not respond to inquiries. The university's spokesman, Phil Weiler, did not respond to multiple emails including a list of questions.</p>

Other signs of the city's unease were easy to find. One graduate student had arrived in Pullman a few days ago to move in for the semester only to be told by his landlords that they were backing out: Unnerved by the killings, they had changed their mind about renting the apartment.

Even with a suspect in custody, the student and his roommate — who were moving into the Steptoe apartment complex where Kohberger had lived — said on Saturday they felt uneasy. Neither wanted to be identified by name because of safety concerns.

"This is supposed to be a safe town. Nothing ever happens," his roommate said. "People are more cautious now. Everyone is double-locking their doors."

Sheets, who also lives in the complex, said it was difficult to see images of her home plastered on TV news and the address published in the affidavit. She keeps thinking about how she walked her dog by Kohberger's apartment almost daily, saw his white Hyundai Elantra in the parking lot and worked in the same building on campus as he did.

Maricel Wallace, 36, said she and her husband used to let their children, ages 6 and 10, visit the playground outside Kohberger's apartment unsupervised. After the attacks in Idaho, Wallace's husband bought security sensors for their windows and began double-locking their door.

"I can't sleep. I have nightmares," Wallace said. "I thought it was a very safe community ... It's hard. It's really hard."

In addition to bulwarking security, many are bunkering from reporters who have descended on a normally sleepy community. On Saturday, a Washington Post reporter found the street outside the victims' house in Moscow, about 11 miles from Kohberger's Pullman apartment, still lined with news crews seeking answers.

More than half a dozen people affiliated with WSU told The Post they could not talk or referred a reporter to Weiler. Some who were working or living at the university-owned Steptoe apartment complex said the school instructed them not to speak to journalists.

Emails from Kohberger have been removed from the university system, said a student who had Kohberger as a teaching assistant for an undergraduate criminal law class last semester.

"He's still listed as a contact, but all our emails from him are gone," the student said in a text message Saturday.

WSU also removed its online student directory for the criminal justice program, saying the action was meant to protect the graduate students' privacy.

Meanwhile, a sweeping gag order that prohibits the police, prosecutors and defense lawyers from commenting publicly remains in place.

In a public letter last week, WSU-Pullman Chancellor Elizabeth S. Chilton told community members they could choose whether to speak to reporters and said they could forward inquiries to the school's marketing director. She also said students could request to have their email addresses changed and remove their contact information from the student directory.

The announcement of the arrest of Kohberger, who is no longer enrolled at the school, "has shocked our communities," Chilton wrote in the letter.

"I am hopeful that the coming days and weeks will provide all of us with additional answers and information about the nature of this incident," she wrote.

Kohberger, booked in Idaho's Latah County Jail, is scheduled to appear in court on Thursday. If he eventually pleads guilty or is found guilty, he could face life in prison or the death penalty in Idaho.

The affidavit offered the most detailed glimpse yet of the evidence investigators say they gathered. Authorities say they matched DNA from a knife sheath found beside Mogen's body and obtained cell records showing Kohberger's phone had been near the victims' neighborhood at least a dozen times in the months before the killings.

Police also said they spoke with a surviving roommate who they think saw the killer, and video surveillance showed a white Elantra speeding from the house at 4:20 a.m.

"It's extremely significant," retired New York Police Department sergeant Joseph Giacalone said of the evidence. "Unlike what you see on television, this is a textbook case."

Giacalone, an adjunct professor at New York's John Jay College of Criminal Justice, called the authorities' strategy to withhold developments from the public "good police work," allowing investigators to compile evidence while not tipping off the suspect.

Giacalone, who has followed the case, said investigators may reveal more in subsequent filings and hearings about what they found in Kohberger's home after they arrested him. For instance, his laptop could reveal more about how he spent his time during his first semester at Washington State.

In high school, Kohberger was known as shy and socially awkward, classmate Roula Theodoropoulos, 29, said. She recalled him arriving alone to post-graduation parties at her house and talking only to people he already knew. In conversations in his car, Theodoropoulos said, Kohberger used to tell her that he was depressed.

"He was really smart, and the way that he described his sadness was really deep — something that I couldn't fathom at 19 years old," Theodoropoulos said.

In Pullman, the agitation and grief lingering on and off campus appeared unlikely to go away soon. Nephi Duff, who lives in the Steptoe apartments, recalled never seeing Kohberger despite living in the building next door.

"[I was] surprised that there was somebody like that so close," Duff said. "It sucks. I've got a 3-year-old daughter, and there's somebody who potentially killed four people next door."

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